Galaxy

MAGAZINE

SCIENCE FICTION

MAY 1969 60¢

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Man Spekith by RICHARD WILSON

★

Star Dream by ERRY CARR & ALEXEI PANSHIN

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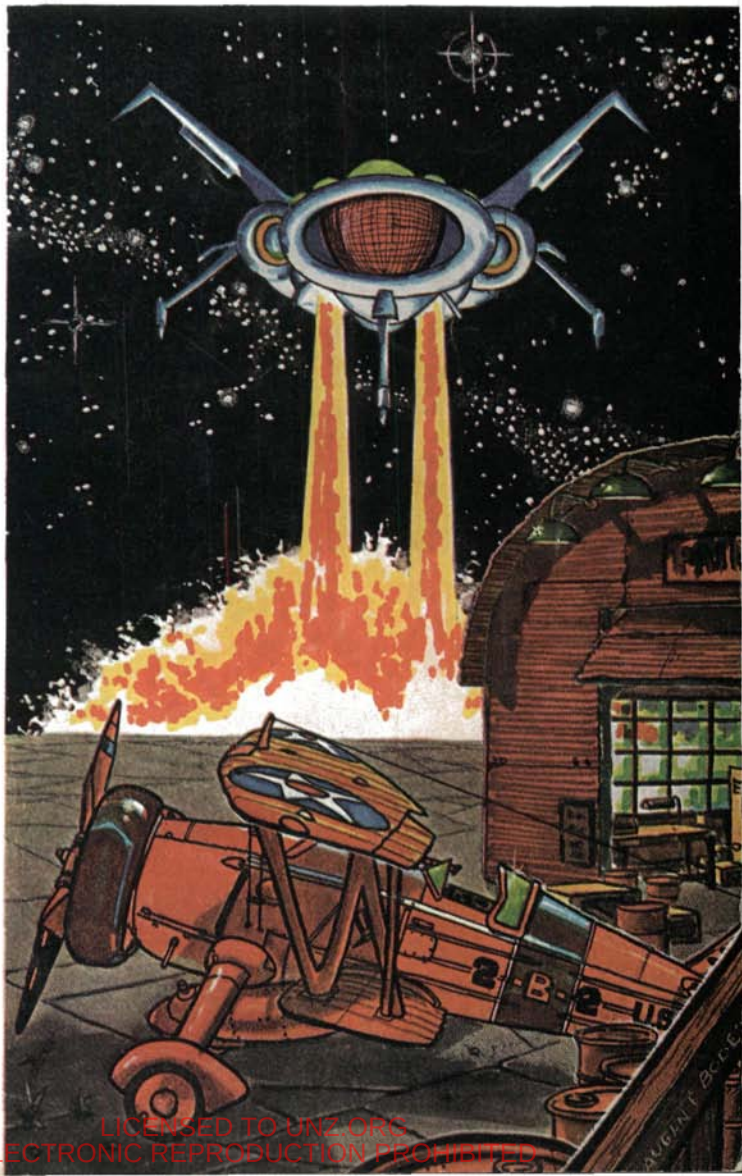

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Galaxy
MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW

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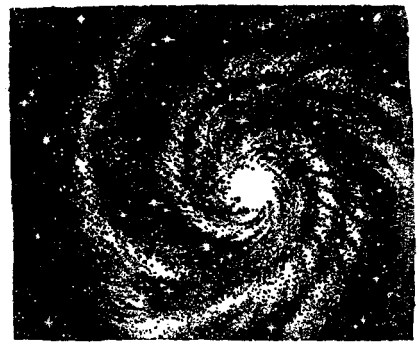

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The Littleness of Earth and the Bigness of Man

A publication for which we have much respect, and from which we derive much enjoyment, is England's *New Scientist,* which manages to compress in a single slim weekly issue nearly everything that is happening in nearly all of science. Like most of the people and institutions we most admire, though, the *New Scientist,* while brilliant and rock-hard reliable most of the time, has its loony moments. One happened last Christmas. The occasion was the marvelous Apollo 8 circumnavigation of the moon. Most of the world rejoiced and applauded; *New Scientist* managed only to weep a few tears of shame that those childish Americans were spending all that money on spaceflight while billions here on Earth lacked proper food.

What is most disturbing about this particular aberration is that it is by no means limited to *New Scientist,* nor to the world outside the U.S.A. We hear plenty of it right here at home; and the last public-opinion survey released in the newspapers shows that it is shared by a majority of American voters. At least, only some 38% are clearly in favor of the space program, while nearly twice as many are either actively opposed, or don't much know about it or don't much care.

There's not much point in going into arguments once more. Surely there is much need for Doing Something about world hunger, about the cities, about racial problems, about peace. But will taking money from the space program help in any of these ways? Hardly. There's no evidence at all that curtailing the space program, even canceling it entire-

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AVON ANNOUNCES SPRING

Here's what's blossoming:

APRIL: Norman Spinrad's eagerly (if somewhat nervously) awaited
BUG JACK BARRON

A well-titled anthology featuring
two chillers by Mervyn Peake
WEIRD SHADOWS FROM BEYOND

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Andrew Sinclair's stunning literary fantasy
GOG

MAY: M. K. Joseph's mind-bending trip through unspace
THE HOLE IN THE ZERO

Poul Anderson's little classic
VAULT OF THE AGES

And Stanley G. Weinbaum's other long
unavailable masterpiece
THE NEW ADAM

JUNE: Brian W. Aldiss' brilliant new novel of mind-travel
CRYPTOZOIC!

A great new Bob Shaw novel
SHADOW OF HEAVEN

Robert Graves' unforgettable far-future utopian fantasy
WATCH THE NORTHWIND RISE

And what may summer bring? The best work ever (we think) of Harlan Ellison and Robert Silverberg, among other delights. . . .

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ly, will contribute a nickel's worth of benefit to any of those causes. It might well do them harm: certainly the skills and resources in the space program now can be more readily diverted to, say, the manufacture of more destructive armaments than to clearing up air pollution or urban crime.

But there's not much point, either, in merely deploring a state of mind. The anti-space people may be very wrong, but they are also very convinced. It would be desirable to find some way in which the space program can actively help to solve human problems right here and now.

Is there such a possibility?

It turns out there is; and it was suggested in the March issue of another estimable magazine, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* by its editor, Eugene Rabinowitch.

The world is small, says Rabinowitch, and no one knows it better than the astronauts and the cosmonauts, who alone among us can see it from outside. It makes no sense to divide so tiny a particle into warring camps. There is only one human race; we might as well learn how to get along with one another.

Some day, perhaps, we will find Somebody Else out there, and maybe then we will find ourselves united perforce against a common enemy. But whether that happens or not, surely we can conquer space better together than we can in competition. And what better time to start cooperating than now?

Until now, the space programs of the U.S.A. and the Russians have been wholly competitive. But, says Rabinowitch,

> Sooner or later, the circle must be broken. Why not now? Why should we not offer the Soviet Union participation in an Apollo mission, in exchange for United States participation in a Soviet manned space flight?

Why not indeed?

Oh, to be sure, if one puts one's mind to it, there are a few "why nots" to be found. The language barrier. The security barrier. The opposition of hard-liners on both sides.

But those are problems that amount to nothing, compared to what is to be gained. No one is suggesting that anybody give anything away; it is a suggestion for a one-for-one trade; and all of human history suggests that trade benefits both sides.

Good idea? We think so. We think it is worth the President's attention. We think it is worth writing a few letters to congressmen about . . . right now.

—THE EDITOR

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LITTLE BLUE HAWK

by SYDNEY VAN SCYOC

Illustrated by REESE

By law, he was a Special Person but his birthright was divided between the sky and the crystal shards of his earthbound angers.

I

It was a bitter March noon when Kert Tahn shattered angry words at the feet of that arrogant man, the dispatcher at Sundley Transport. Kert's blue crest flared. His eyes shot hawk-fire. Two months of anger jarred from his lips in fiery crystals and smashed to the pavement.

When the last hot word lay sharded, Kert thrust past the speechless dispatcher, past the

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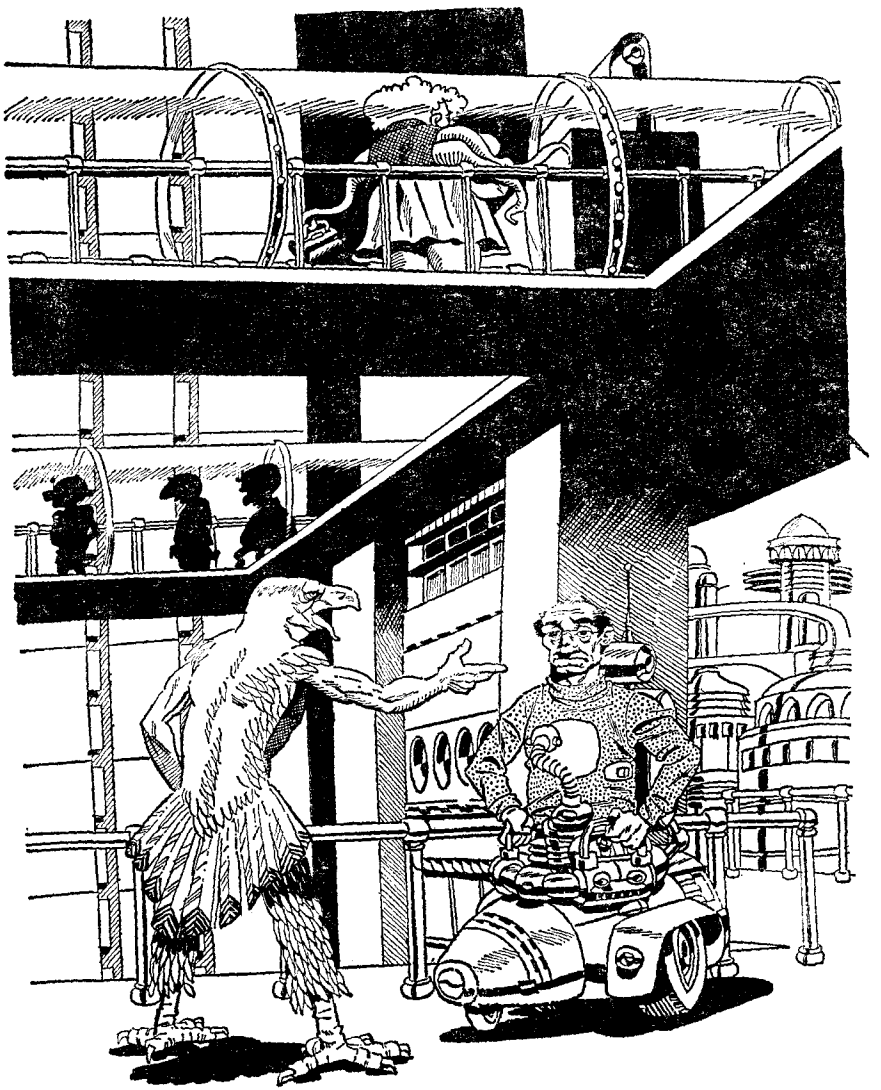

LITTLE BLUE HAWK

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fully loaded hoverdish, squat and tonnish, down the lift-ramp, into the street.

Sunlight flickered weakly off the pavement, flashed palely at the copper and scarlet medallion at Kert Tahn's neck. He was a lean and hungry Person, with a stiff shock of blue feathers and the face of a circling hawk. But no one in the midday crowd gave him a second glance.

Kert bounced off a hefty matron who clutched parcels in six stout arms, jarred into her mate, whose blood foamed through heavy jugs strapped to his arms. He sideswiped a burly individual with wheeled metal legs.

The burly man spun hard against a wall and wheeled around. "You want to match me, bird?" He squealed his tires hotly.

Kert clenched his teeth against a hard crystal of anger. "My trespass," he muttered, touching his medallion. He dodged away.

He pounded pavement underfoot for an hour, dispersing the bitter remnants of anger. Then, calmed, he raised his eyes. The walls of the city canyoned around him, suddenly confining. Far above, hovercraft wove a random pattern across a patch of pale sky.

Kert's chest tightened. The need to rise was suddenly desperate, the need to loft into the sky, to renew his futile, angering search for something nameless, formless that beckoned there, far and high. He labored for breath against crushing claustrophobic bands.

Straining for breath, he glared around. He located a callbooth and entered. He punched at the callboard, then raked harsh fingers through his stiffened crest.

The copper and scarlet insignia of the Special Persons Bureau filled the viewscreen. "Special Persons Bureau. Which desk, please?"

"Jobs One."

A moment and Jobs One splashed upon the viewscreen, a butterscotch girl, pertly smiling. Then she recognized Kert Tahn. The smile melted down her face. "Mr. Tahn! You haven't jobbed off again!"

His voice was harsh. "I have. An hour ago." He beamed hawkfire into the viewsender, trying to burn urgency into her butterscotch heart. "I need another job. Now."

"But Mr. Tahn! Sundley Transport was your sixth job since last May. Six jobs in less than a year, Mr. Tahn. That's—"

Kert's crest flared. "Then get me one that fits this time."

Jobs One covered herself with an apologetic smile. "I'll certainly do what I can." She bent. Her fingers danced earnestly over the computer board.

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Kert slumped against the wall of the callbooth. His words showed as solids to his eyes; though others seemed never to see them Now they lay on the floor, slowly evaporating. He kicked aside the dissolving crystals. He ran a smoothing hand over his crest. Overhead, city traffic bobbed, beckoning.

Eventually Jobs One raised a pleasant smile. "Mr. Tahn, I can place you right within the Special Persons Bureau. The computer has matched you with a slot at Rural Welfare. It's remote area work, daylight hours, with minimum radio work. It seems ideal, really. May I arrange an interview?"

Kert's chest loosened. He sighed deeply. "Call me at home when it's arranged."

Kert stepped from the booth. He stared up into the city sky. Maybe this time the job would be tolerable. Maybe this time the craft would be light and fleet. Maybe, together, they would rise, seek — find.

Find what? Frowning, Kert averted his eyes from the sky.

Kert's apartment was a small place that gleamed with metal.

When he keyed the door, the wallphone summoned.

"You certainly took your time," Jobs One said brightly. "I spoke

Ballantine Books

MAY will see us fairly launched on our fantasy program with the release of Fletcher Pratt's parallel-world novel THE BLUE STAR (95c) — a remarkable extrapolation of a world in which witchcraft, rather than the sciences, is the repository of knowledge. There is an affectionate and discerning Introduction by Lin Carter, who is editing this series for us — and whose own book, *TOLKIEN: A Look Behind "The Lord of the Rings,"* has already won high praise from such trade media as *Publishers' Weekly*.

(A friendly reminder to regular reviewers who will certainly not want to be unaware of such major reading trends — and we are not being even remotely sardonic. Adult fantasy reading, headed by Tolkien, is a major reading trend if ever there was one. And Lin's book is a boon as a guide to adult fantasy; besides being a lot of fun just for its own sake.)

MAY sees also two original science-fiction works from the House that Brings You Nothing but the Best (for you who have been complain-

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ing — this is, too, an ad.) Namely, DIMENSION THIRTEEN, in which Robert Silverberg provides thirteen variations with his usual precision and finesse. We claim he uses a scalpel rather than a typewriter. One of our favorite authors, even if he does want to be Pope.

AND a new writer for us — Richard C. Meredith — with a taut, totally believable drama, just the kind of mess humankind is likely to get into if it ever reaches the stars, titled THE SKY IS FILLED WITH SHIPS.

A reminder of other goodies you can get from us — the works of Anne McCaffrey, Edmund Cooper, E.R. Eddison, James White, Miriam Allen deFord, John Wyndham, Arthur C. Clarke, and any number more. For details, write to our splendid new warehouse, Dept. GCS, Ballantine Books, 36 West 20th Street, New York 10003. That definitely is West 20th, by the way. We previously listed it (in the March issue) as 23rd. Couldn't find the place ourselves when we went looking. Its 20th, 20th, 20th! Or you can write us here at 101 Fifth Avenue, same city. BB

to Mr. Daimler at Rural Welfare. They're ready to begin Spring Mission, and he's three men short. You're to sign papers of employment tomorrow early at Bureau headquarters, mid-city. Then report to Mr. Daimler, Rural Welfare Division, city-perimeter, to begin work immediately." Her smile was full of self-congratulation. "And please — don't let me hear from you for at least a year."

Kert paced the apartment restlessly. Finally at dusk, he shafted to street level. He prowled, eyes constantly seeking the sky, where night-lit hovercraft wove intricate patterns.

Kert had come to the city out of the sky twenty-two years before as an infant, orphaned. His parents had inhabited one of the rural settlements maintained by the special Persons Bureau for those of the genetically disadvantaged, unable to adjust to urban life.

His parents had lived and they had died, and beyond those simple facts, Kert was ignorant of them. The Special Persons Bureau had hung its medallion at his neck, marking him its own child, a variant on the human theme. The Bureau had fed and clothed him, sheltered and schooled him. The Bureau had served him as mother, father, aunt and uncle. Now in his refractory adulthood, it brooded over him,

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nagging, advising, moralizing.

Kert prowled, nighthawk in blue. His eyes flickered restlessly over his fellows, sorting them: normal, apparently normal but medallioned, visibly variant.

The variants he classed automatically into sub-groups. There were those variants as to size, as to proportion, number and type of limbs, facial topography, skin texture, complexion tone. There were even a few who boasted fledgling crops of feathers.

Nowhere did he meet another with crest of blue and the face of a hawk.

Had he expected to?

Once he had. Questing, he had even joined the Fraternal Order of Feathered Friends briefly. Birds of a feather did indeed flock together. But flocking, fluttering and idly pecking had proven disappointing. He had abandoned the fraternity in disgust.

Then, still seeking true peers, he had located scores of Persons who claimed to perceive sound as a visible phenomenon. He had even discovered a few who claimed to experience it as a tangible entity.

Kert's crest stiffened with bitter memory. Kert Tahn, adolescent, had known how the crystallized word glistened, how it shattered and splintered against the pavement, how it evaporated swiftly into the air. No one could tell him it was spongy and gray or fluffy and pale. Or that it washed against the walls in rainbow waves.

And so at seventeen, his search complete, Kert had found himself alone in the city, unique. He had closed the city from his dreams. He had begun to listen for the call of the sky, dim, tantalizing eternally evanescing.

The sky darkened now, veined itself with lightning. Rain fell. Crest dampened, Kert returned to his apartment to drug himself into black sleep.

Morning came. Kert fueled himself with a handful of nutricaps and boarded the ziptube early, knotted with tension.

Special Persons Headquarters, mid-city, was a massive pink hive. The Person at the desk rubbed her medallion in horny fingers, clacked cornecus ridges that served for teeth and proffered papers of employment. "Are you acquainted with the Bureau's pay scale, Mr. Tahn?"

"I am." He scrawled his name, the track of a bird. He backed away from her terrible smile.

The ziptube deposited him near Rural Welfare Division at city-perimeter. He was directed to the west wing of the complex. There a receptionist escorted him directly to Mr. Daimler, Director of Transport.

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Daimler jellied from his chair, beaming fatly. Greedy black eyes gobbled Kert from crest to toe. "Ah, well! A hoverman who looks like he really belongs in the sky!" Despite his grotesque bulk, Daimler wore no medallion. "You've signed papers of employment, I presume?"

"I have." Kert's crest flattened involuntarily with distaste.

Daimler beamed greedily. "Good! We're starved for hovermen this season. I'll escort you to the shed myself, Kertis. You'll want to see your ship, discuss your duties."

Reluctantly, Kert let himself be maneuvered out the door, down the hallway.

"I presume you're a city boy, Kertis?" Daimler quivered with massive good will.

"I was born in one of the rural settlements."

"Ah, well! Then you'll know all about Spring Mission. Which settlement claims you, Kertis?"

Kert's forehead creased. "I was orphaned out early. I grew up in the city." The words ground through his teeth in splinters.

"Ah! A shame! You missed a wonderful opportunity to grow up in the Rural America of the Twenty-First Century," Daimler caroled. "This is the true age of individualism, Kertis. During Spring Mission our caseworkers will visit scores of communities, each with its own rich heritage, no two alike. Completely unlike the America of the last century, a homogeneous society, composed of homogeneous individuals — *and each community like every* other in social structure and content."

Kert's body tightened ominously.

"Of course, there is a certain isolationism involved." Daimler burbled. "Many Special Persons are unable to adjust to the demands of society — or even to contact with it. Our workers visit and evaluate hundreds of solitaries, People who see no human face other than the caseworker's from year to year. And of course there are isolated family units as well. Our semi-annual distribution of commodities is a mammoth task in itself. And before it can be begun, our workers must visit and evaluate each community, each isolated family unit, each individual solitary."

They had traversed the Division complex to the hangars. A vast empty area spread before them, stained with oil and strewn with tools.

"The fleet has already lifted out for the day." Daimler jellied across the hangar floor. "Now, I've assigned you one of our older vehicles, Kertis. Today I want you to loft up, get the feel of it. Then drop in at the ops suite

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and peruse our files. Tomorrow you will carry three workers into one of our older, better developed areas. Later, if you measure up, I'll assign you a more challenging route."

But Kert didn't hear. His eyes narrowed upon the small blue hovercraft that squatted on the hangar floor, rusted, sun-faded, dimmed with years. His body stiffened. His breath caught, stopped.

Daimler echoed vainly, from afar. Kert Tahn stood alone in the world with the small blue hoverdish.

His legs moved, took him in slow circuit about the dish. His lungs drew breath again and deep within him something pulsed and throbbed.

He had searched the city, searched the sky, searched a thousand empty hours of his life, for something that had no name. All that time, the dish had waited here.

Had waited rusting and fading.

Kert made a second circuit of the dish. He catalogued the work that cried to be done, the deep cleaning inside and out, the rubbing and polishing, the loving and cherishing.

II

Daimler's voice penetrated Kert's consciousness again. "I suppose it does look a trifle rough, Kertis. But our chief mechanic ran a general overhaul just last month in preparation for Spring Mission. The ship is in excellent mechanical repair, I assure you." His voice worried upon the need to sky the ship immediately, upon the urgency of the Mission, upon the crushing rural caseload.

Even as Daimler spoke, Kert's mind moved quickly, incisively upon the problem of the blue dish. He considered, debated — and decided upon his strategem.

He set his profile distastefully, flared back his crest. "I wouldn't loft in this plate if you paid me solid platinum." The words shattered upon the hangar floor in dark crystals of scorn.

Daimler stared at him, uncomprehending.

Kert stepped over his sharded words. "Call Jobs One. She'll cancel my papers of employment."

Kert had reached the hangar door before Daimler regained himself. "Kertis! You can't mean — "

"I do mean." Kert slid the door between them, decisively.

From the street, Kert looked back to the hangar where the blue craft sheltered. Anxiety stabbed him, a cold steel blade.

It was, after all, strictly a gamble that he could manipulate Daimler and Jobs One, that he could win his way with the blue

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hoverdish. It was purely a gamble that Daimler was desperate enough for hovermen to take Kert on Kert's own terms.

Frowning inwardly, Kert boarded the ziptube.

His apartment gleamed with metallic everyday oddments polished into bits of metal sculpture. Kert polished at his treasures with salty palms, waiting.

An hour passed. The wallphone summoned.

Metal clattered from Kert's hands. "Yes?"

Jobs One regarded him anxiously. "Mr. Tahn, Mr. Daimler is very agitated. He tells me you refused to fly for him. I explained that surely there was some mistake, that he had misunderstood you."

"I told him I wouldn't loft his dish for solid platinum."

Jobs One blanched. "Mr. Tahn!" She leaned earnestly into the screen. "Mr. Tahn, please. I was so upset, I computed all the factors again. To be sure I hadn't made some terrible mistake the first time. Really, Mr. Tahn, the job is very ideal — much better than anything else available just now. Can't you at least be more specific in your reasons for refusal?"

"I can. The dish is filthy. Half a dozen dents in the shell. Instruments greasy inside and out. Paint dulled where it isn't chipped off or rusted away entirely. If the power plant matches the exterior, I could fall like a rock. If you'll look, you'll see my shoulders are bare — I'm a bird without wings."

"But Mr. Tahn! Mr. Daimer wouldn't loft caseworkers in a dish that wasn't airworthy. I'm sure they've been simply too rushed to perform non-essential maintenance."

Kert regarded her scornfully. He reached to break circuit.

She sighed helplessly. "All right, I'll speak to Mr. Daimler again. I'll suggest he call in a cleaning crew. Perhaps we can even — "

"No!" The word leapt up his throat, gashing his lip.

He wiped blood from his lip. "I'll clean it myself."

Her eyes widened.

She frowned. Then her face blossomed.

"Why then of course! As often as I've scanned your file, I should have guessed. You want to polish the dish yourself. I'll call Mr. Daimler right away. I'll — "

He withdrew his thoughts from her.

Frowning, he considered the materials he would need to make the dish blue as the sky, light as a cloud, as shining in body as in soul.

He jotted his list, then shafted to street level. Triumph cried a fierce song in his heart.

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Some of the cleaning products he required were popular and widely distributed. Others were more difficult to locate. Kert pushed his way from shop to shop, glaring fiercely into the dim March sun. Clerks quivered and wilted under his razor sharp demands.

Then the bulky rainbow of jugs was heaped into the rented carry-cart. The cart wheeled faithfully in Kert's wake through the noon crowd, losing him only once briefly.

The hangar stood empty except for the blue dish and, beneath it, the mechanic. At Kert's approach, the mechanic scrambled up, twitched nervously and spidered away, oddly jointed fingers flexing at the ends of long, thrice-elbowed arms.

Metal shelves lined the hangar wall. Kert arranged his cleaning products upon the shelves. Each container carried a glowing skull and crossbones. Each responded to the touch of his hand with its insistently shrill audible warning: "Contents of this container harmful or fatal if taken internally. Under penalty of law, keep this container beyond the reach of children."

Kert escorted the emptied carrycart to the hangar door and triggered its homing circuit. It whirred smoothly away.

He paced around the blue dish slowly, almost ritually, re-establishing communion. Finally satisfied, he took from the shelf a large violet jug. He unlidded the container, sniffed the contents.

"Contents of this container harmful if taken internally," the jug insisted. "Under penalty of law — "

Kert pinched his nostrils shut, tilted back his head. He drank deeply.

He set the violet jug back on the shelf. He breathed deeply, evenly, as the cleanser burned down his throat. His vision blurred, then cleared. He rolled up the sleeves of his coveralls, flexed his fingers experimentally.

The hangar door slid noisily. Daimler jellied into the hangar, a beaming mound. "Kertis! My chief mechanic told me you'd returned. You've already begun work, I see."

"I have." Kert regarded him through slitted eyes. He rubbed at the skin of the blue hoverdish with the palm of his hand, frowning. The violet product was not yet sufficiently metabolized to cut the surface dullness.

"Ah, well! How very fortunate that we were able to correct our misunderstanding. The dish is in excellent mechanical condition, I assure you. It was custom-made for a private citizen who willed it to us upon his death a few years ago. It's a splendid little

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ship, one of a kind — but I suppose we have let it become a bit shabby."

Kert said sharply, "It's carrying five years of film."

Daimler quivered. "Exactly, exactly!" he cried, in eager expiation. He cleared his throat, coughed and gestured expansively. "But I presume, Kertis, that you can have it in satisfactory condition in a day or two."

Kert shuddered as the cleansing product reached his pores in a hot, wet flash. His eyes overflowed with tears. Blinking, he rubbed at the hoverdish with the outside flesh of his forearm. He tried the inner flesh of the other arm, nodded with satisfaction.

"Within three days, perhaps?" Daimler suggested hopefully.

"It'll be done when it's done."

"Well, ah — just do whatever — " Daimler gestured nervously. "I won't keep you any longer, Kertis. Let me know when you're ready to be scheduled."

Kert stared after Daimler, then glared distastefully at Daimler's crystallic wordage melting messily on the hangar floor. He kicked aside his own splintered words. He flexed his fingers experimentally.

The blue hoverdish responded gratefully to his rubbing fingers, his polishing palms. He settled to work, oblivious to everything but the tarnished blue dish and its wishful soul.

The worst disfigurement was the overall dullness that masked the craft inside and out, concealing texture and grain and dimming body and soul.

It was a dullness that lay everywhere, spread over the world like a thin gray pall. At first Kert's apartment had been dreary with it. He had spent months of his free time rubbing and polishing, making himself one place in the world that shone true. In the process, he had reached a conclusion about the nature of the pall.

It was simply the final end product of the process of speech.

It was the last minute residue left by the apparently fast-evaporating words that fell from the careless lips of the world.

Kert had been deeply shocked at first to realize that the spoken word did not evaporate completely. Instead, each word left an imperceptible drift of matter, invisible by itself but — combined with a million like itself — clearly, appallingly visible. Accepting this theory had meant renouncing his firmest conviction about the nature of speech.

But he had made the renunciation. And now, as he worked at the hoverdish, his conclusion was reconfirmed.

The dullness lay over the dish's interior in pronounced layers

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which brought to mind verbal fingerprints. Although all were of the same general nature, each layer, upon close inspection, had strikingly individual characteristics. If labeled samples had been available, Kert could have identified the individual responsible for each thin layer of the pall.

The individual layers differed in composition as well as appearance. Kert had to spot test each thin layer carefully to determine which cleaning agent would yield best results. Some layers sloughed off easily. Others required intensified effort.

Finally late Friday, a week later, Kert circled the ship, a gaunt and ravaged hawk. His hands and arms were raw with running sores. His crest drooped. His eyes were puffed, his tongue a mass of lumps. Throat and intestines burned poisonously. His breath hung in fuming clouds.

But the initial cleaning was done.

Kert slumped against the hoverdish. Despair crystallized within him as he watched the late afternoon crowd of caseworkers gaggle through the hangar. Young and old, normal and medallioned, their common identifying characteristic was that they talked — and talked and talked, strewing behind them a crystallic rubble of dissolving wordage.

Kert had found their gabbing numbers more ominous each day of the week. Now they hurried past his immaculate hoverdish again, heedlessly strewing their verbal pall.

Kert jerked, startled by an even more unwelcome voice.

"Ah, well! I see you've completed your polishing, Kertis." Daimler quivered in a heap at Kert's side. An aggressive gleam lit his damp eye. "I believe you are ready, in fact, to carry a few passengers for me."

Kert tried to match Daimler's aggressive tone. "I am not. It will take me another five days to sand and paint the outer shell. Then I may be ready." The words fell with an empty rattle.

Daimler jellied sternly around the hoverdish. "No, Kertis, you have pursued your whim long enough. I fear I can't see that you have accomplished anything notable in the week I've already given you. Beyond blistering yourself raw and fuming the hangar with your chemicals."

Kert's crest flared fiercely. "*You can't see?* You aren't blind, are you? You have eyes. You — "

"Oh, you've cleaned the upholstery, swept away the bread crumbs, polished the trim a bit. But — " He hoisted a hand against Kert's protest. " — I fear I will have to ask you to continue your ministrations on your own time. You've grounded my craft

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for a week, you know. You've collected full hover pay for work a cleaning crew could have accomplished in half a day. Now, I have posted next week's schedule in the ops suite. I fear, Kertis, that if you fail to meet your schedule, I will feel compelled to lay complaint before the hovermen's guild."

Kert clenched blistered fists helplessly. Of course Daimler *couldn't* see. His eyes *were* blind to the graying layer that hung over the hangar, over the world.

"And then you would lose the little ship you regard so fondly, Kertis. So drop by the ops suite before five. And — happy hovering"

Kert glared after Daimler. He pounded his fists in inarticulate rage.

III

His schedule was posted prominently in the ops suite. He scanned it with darkening rage. Daimler had scheduled his verbaceous caseworkers into Kert's dish in a patternless musical chairs. In the course of the week, Kert would carry thirteen different workers in the craft.

That meant thirteen different vocal patterns layered over the now-immaculate interior of the craft. Thirteen different patterns to be scrubbed and polished away at week's end. Gallons of cleanser to be ingested, metabolized, to burn down his guts and sear out his pores.

In blind rage, Kert hurdled from the ops suite, hawked through the halls.

Halfway to Daimler's office, he folded against a wall, the driving vitality of rage spent.

His mind tore at the dilemma. If Kert defied Daimler and Daimler filed complaint, the guild would suspend his license for a year. He would, inevitably, lose the blue hoverdish.

But if he yielded to Daimler . . .

Weakly he pulled himself erect. He clutched his medallion in despair.

And the syllables of salvation whispered quietly into his mind.

Christian Yorber.

Counselor Yorber, the man legally and morally responsible for Special Person Kertis Talin's haelth, welfare and pursuit of happiness.

Yorber had to help.

Provided Kert could demonstrate that his health and welfare were dependent upon Yorber's intervention.

Kert's crest flared. He winged to the hangar, to the wallphone in one dim corner. He punched.

Copper and scarlet filled the viewscreen. "Special Persons Bureau. Which desk, please?"

"Counselor Yorber."

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A moment, and Yorber's secretary regarded him sternly. "Yes, Mr. Tahn?"

"I need counsel. I'm coming. Now."

Distress eroded her countenance. "Counselor is preparing to leave immediately for the weekend. I must ask you to accept an appointment." Her eyes shifted quickly to the appointment chart.

"I'll be there in half an hour." Kert broke the circuit.

He showered in the locker room and slapped on a tunic. As he shaped his crest, his eyes scanned his mirrored image. Puffed eyes watered. Sores, scrubbed free of scab oozed. He pinched his lips. Blood spotted through cracked membranes.

Satisfied, he hawked into the late afternoon crowd. The pedestrians turned to stare at the gaunt hawk with eyes of fire.

Kert presented himself, stiff-shouldered and uncompromising, at the secretary's desk. "I've come for counsel."

The secretary escorted him to the inner office immediately but stonily.

Christian Yorber, a gray man, sat framed against a gray wall, behind a gray desk. His gray eyes narrowed as he scanned his client. Yorber's body was slight, his features nondescript. But his voice, crisp and clear, formed word-jewels of brilliant color. "Sit down, Kertis. What's the story?"

Kert externalized the narrative in hard, dark crystals.

Listening, Yorber hoisted one pale eyebrow. Finally he nodded. "Yes. I appreciate that the situation might act detrimentally upon your health and general welfare."

He leaned back, his lips firmly shut.

Kert's crest twitched. He tightened his own lips, controlled his impulse to angry speech.

Finally, coolly, Yorber nodded again. With a fingertip, he traced a pattern on his desktop. "I'm sure you realize there is no rational necessity to keep the hovercraft scrubbed free of a pall that is, after all, visible only to you."

Kert stiffened. "I have the right to my obsessions and compulsions. Article 15, the Special Constitution for Disadvantaged Citizens."

"Ah, the Special Constitution." Yorber smiled faintly. "I wonder how well you are acquainted with the history of the Special People."

"Very well," Kert said, sharply — but vainly.

Yorber invariably took a quick run through the history of the disadvantaged while his mind sorted the problem at hand.

"It was late in the last cen-

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tury when certain groups of biochemists made their premature efforts at genetic manipulation of human stock." Yorber's words fell upon the desktop in glowing crystals. "They enjoyed some spectacular successes at first. Highly publicized successes. But those were soon overshadowed by their failures, individuals hardly human in form but, once created, nevertheless entitled to the same rights as any normal citizen — life, liberty, pursuit of happiness.

"In the end laws were formulated to bring an end to genetic dabbling. But those, of course, provided no relief for those thousands of special individuals already created. There were the physically malformed, the metabolically disturbed, and — perhaps most important — those who suffered drastically altered processes of thought and perception: people who heard different voices, saw different stars, plunged away in pursuit of fantasies never dreamed before.

"All of them required special help, of one type or another. And so the Special Persons Bureau was chartered to protect the right of the genetically disadvantaged to live out their lives in their own fashion, provided they offered no harm to the general population.

"That involved the right to seek companionship, to marry, to produce young — which complicated the Bureau's job immeasurably. Today the genetically altered have married out widely into the normal world, disseminating their altered genetic material into the population at large. And the Bureau finds itself ministering to an ever-increasing proportion of the population. Each year thousands of newborn are added to the caseload. And each individual on the rolls is entitled to full service, even though chromosomal studies may show that he carries only minor genetic alteration.

"Of course if all our clients were genetically normal, there would nevertheless be a certain number of harmless nuts among them, a certain number of mental deficients, a certain number of hopeless insane. And none of them could command any special consideration.

"But under the Special Constitution, they must be considered Special People first, nuts second. They can demand that their eccentricities be elevated to the level of constitutional rights."

Kert's face darkened.

"The system does have a certain charm," Yorber mused. "The Bureau has been able to integrate the harmless, garden-variety nut into the community simply by hanging a medallion at his neck

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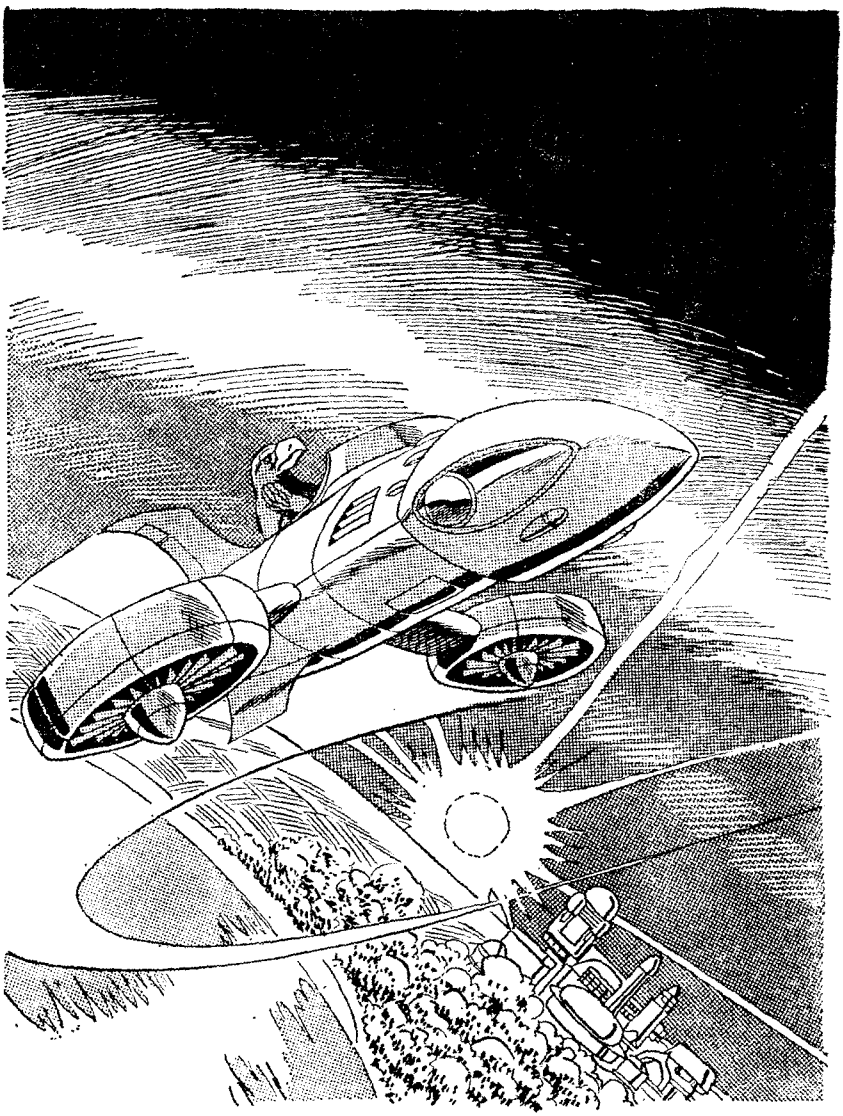

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and telling him to run to us if the world doesn't treat him right. John D. Citizen is warned by the medallion — if not by some conspicuous physical abnormality —that he may be dealing with a nut. He treads lightly. In our own modest way, we've converted an unwieldy mass of nuts and cranks into reasonably productive citizens."

Kert's eyes hooded dangerously.

Yorber's gray eyes flickered over him assessingly. "Well, to get down to cases, Kert — as your counselor, I *can* involve myself in the situation by manipulating Daimler into making certain concessions. I can request him, in my official capacity, to schedule the same two or three caseworkers into your hovercraft each day."

"You can," Kert said tautly.

"But will that solve the basic problem, Kert?"

Kert didn't reply.

"Will that eliminate this pall that you see spread over the world? Will it relieve your compulsive need to erase the pall, even at the cost of your health?"

Kert spoke deliberately. "I've told you before. I will not — "

"Submit to hypno-therapy?" Yorber allowed himself a small, still smile. "You know, it's about time you threw this perceptual albatross off your neck, Kert. Daimler would gladly grant you a week's leave of absence for therapy. And our specialists could free you, Kert. They could erase this pall from your mind, where it really exists. Think, Kert!"

Kert spoke in icy crystals. "I have thought. My answer remains — no."

A single crease marred Yorber's forehead. His jaw hardened then relaxed. He sighed irritably. "Very well. Step into the outer office while I wave my magic wand." His hands moved to the calliphone.

Kert paced the outer office. Finally the intercom blinked. The secretary said, "You may re-enter, Mr. Tahn."

Yorber smiled complacently. "Well, I got farther than I expected, Kert. Stuck a few pins into Daimler. He's agreed to assign a single caseworker as your regular passenger. A Special Person, at that — 'Drick Ritter. Oddly enough, Ritter is the caseworker who carried you into the city one fine day over twenty years ago. And so contributed immeasurably to my life's load of discord."

Kert's nostrils flared. "He — brought me out?"

"He brought you out of the wilderness in his arms. And next week you'll be carrying him into the same wilderness in your hovercraft."

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Kert's mind spun wildly at the revelation.

"I've always said I'd be pleased to answer questions about your family background," Yorber murmured. "Provided you make one concession to me."

Kert blinked at him stupidly. Then he understood. "I won't go into hypno-analysis. I won't let anyone put me under."

Yorber leaned across his desk persuasively. "Kert, a week in the lab could be a fistful of pure platinum. Even if we just ordered an analysis, without attempting any reconstruction. Think! As matters stand, I can't distinguish which of your problems are primarily genetic in origin and which are neurotic. But with an analysis report in hand —"

"No," Kert uttered. "No. And never."

Then he was in the street, dizzy with turmoil.

'Drick Ritter — the man who had carried Kert out of Rural America. A man who must have known Kert's mother, his father. 'Drick Ritter — who could look into Kert's eyes and speak his true name.

Kert pounded pavement underfoot, trying to distance himself from the specter of 'Drick Ritter. Christian Yorber came to mind. Kert's thoughts flashed angrily over the counselor.

Kert knew what Yorber wanted. Yorber wanted to wrench open the box labeled Kertis Tahn and putter about inside, picking up pieces, fitting them together. Then when he was done, he could point triumphantly to the completed puzzle. "Look," he could say. "This is *you,* Kertis Tahn."

This is *you.* All these angry years you've tried to get your own hands on these bits and pieces, to fit them into a whole. And you couldn't.

Well, now I've done it for you. Here you are. Look and see, Kertis Tahn.

Look and see.

Then it would be: "Now, observe! If I throw out these three pieces here and have the hypnolab cut me a single piece to fit — notice how the overall picture is improved, Kert? Simple, isn't it?

"Well, then what about these four pieces over here, Kert? Do we need them? And the two in that corner? Then perhaps — "

Kert Tahn slapped city pavement underfoot. Electrical discharges arced through his mind, blinding him. His feet picked their own path.

IV

He reached the hangar at dusk. The hoverdish waited, pale, still rusty. As dusk grayed into

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darkness, the dish floated, light and blue, across the valley and into the mountains.

A rocky shelf jutted from the mountainside, high and chill — Kert's place. The dish settled deftly. Wind glanced across the shelf in violent sheets.

Kert hunkered on the rock. By moonlight, the hoverdish was a ghostly bluebird, yearning upward. Whipped by wind, deafened, Kert saw the entire vision of the blue dish for the first time. And he acknowledged the rightness of the dish of 'Drick Ritter, of his own Spring Mission into Rural America in search of himself.

Compelled, he straightened to his feet. In the transforming moonlight, he felt himself rise weightless. His feet left the rocky shelf. His body drifted lightly, freely into the night sky.

He closed his eyes, lifted his arms, threw back his head. His body arched and rose lightly through thick layers of cloud. Moonlight condensed on his crest.

A moment, an eternity — and he felt himself slowly sinking back.

The enchantment was broken. He glanced down.

His feet rested solidly upon the rocky shelf.

The fantasy of flight fled. The wind rocked him off his feet.

He crouched in a rocky hollow, still dazed by the experience that had seemed so real, had been so false.

His fingers polished at his medallion. He let the night and the bitter cold fill him.

An hour, and he re-united himself with the hoverdish. They lifted into a cloud-whipped sky.

Kert rode the mountains. The ship responded smoothly to his command, rising with a powerful rush, falling softly, lightly.

But soon the mechanics of flight became clumsy and artificial. Kert lifted above the mountains, moved upon night in its high kingdom. Then he let his hands move of their own will. They deadened the artificial, the clumsy — the powerplant.

He caught his breath and held it. His nerve endings moved out to the far points of the hovercraft's shell. The dish's outer skin became his own. Instruments flashed messages directly into his mind. The rush of air was wind in his crest. He was falling.

Air rushed up, icy, frictive. Mountains rose, cragged. The hoverdish splashed down through moist cloud layers. The moon quivered and turned black.

Kert Tahn shuddered back into his fleshy body. Frost-stiffened fingers found the power switch.

The power plant hummed. The ship caught its footing in the icy air and held.

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Kert huddled in the ship, disappointment an icy wedge in his chest. It had been insane to expect the blue dish to fly without power. A hoverdish was of the earth, massy, subject to gravity. A hoverdish was not a bird, to soar enchanted on wings of moonlight.

But an inner voice had said, Try. And he had tried.

Now the rusty pox on the ship's blue skin took his eye. His mind fastened on it. His fingers twitched restlessly.

The ship swooped competently into the city and settled into the deserted hangar. Kert stood, deflated, gathering at reserves of strength and determination. His crest stiffened angrily.

In the dimness, he hoisted a protesting jug of cleanser and glugged the foaming stuff, gagging. He shuddered violently. He polished at the body rust with hands that cracked and laced the floor with blood.

It was late Saturday when he threw himself into the cleaned and sanded ship to sleep with his head pillowed on the controls.

Late Sunday the metamorphosis was complete. The ship stood proudly in its fresh skin, blue as sky, looking as if it might loft up unpowered.

Kert never remembered returning to his apartment. He never remembered falling to the floor, crusted with blood, smeared with paint, reeking with chemical perspiration.

But there he found himself Monday dawn.

The carpet swam into focus. Beyond lay a pale limb, ruined — Kert's arm. He raised it stiffly and stared at it. Shuddering, he groaned to his feet. The sky swept past his window, gray and uncaring.

Kert staggered to the shower. Water needled his ruined flesh, sloughing it away in dead patches. A new skin emerged taut and red, tender.

Kert staggered from the stall, swayed against a wall, dizzy. The world tilted and rocked. Kert groped for his gray coverall. The garment rippled on its hanger, wriggled out of hand.

Kert lunged. His fingers caught the elusive fabric and clung. He lidded his eyes against the quaking universe.

Eventually he opened his eyes. The world had stabilized. He extended one foot gingerly. The floor did not rock. The coverall peeled off its hanger.

He shrugged into the coverall and slid protective gauntlets over the tender new skin of his hands. He hid his bloodshot eyes behind dark goggles. He shaped his crest. Then, ravenous, he hawked to the serving panel.

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But before his breakfast materialized, the callphone summoned.

"Ah, well! I'm delighted to find you up, Kertis." Daimler's face congealed upon the wall. "I presume you know that Counselor Yorber made a formal request concerning your schedule. And that I felt compelled to grant certain concessions."

"I do know," Kert said stiffly. I am grateful."

Daimler's eyes wallowed damply. "Perhaps, Kertis! I have reassigned you to loft Senior Person Ritter, who has served forty-three Spring Missions. Because of his Seniority, and in recognition of his very special gifts, Senior Person Ritter has been granted the privilege of serving as his own counsel. As you may know, the Bureau very rarely assigns this privilege, even to its most Senior clients. I explained these circumstances to Counselor Yorber before we reached agreement last Friday. I presume the counselor relayed this information to you."

Kert felt the world rock beneath his feet. "He did not."

Daimler sighed wearily. "I feared as much. Silence was, of course, Counselor Yorber's prerogative. However! I presume you appreciate the full significance of the facts I have laid before you, Kertis. I hope you will not create difficulty for us all by attempting to manipulate Person Ritter as you have manipulated Counselor Yorber and me." Kert stiffened.

Daimler puffed his cheeks importantly. "Now! Senior Person Ritter has asked me to relay a few, umm, requests. First, you are to be prepared to lift off at 8:47 precisely. This is the exact hour and moment when Ritter expects to loft each morning of Mission. Absolutely no deviation permitted. Then you are never to speak to Ritter until he has first spoken to you — not upon any occasion, for any reason. You are never to wear or carry any article that is red. You are to wear nothing upon your hands or face. And you are never to look at Person Ritter's feet. He is most emphatic about this last point. Never glance downward in such a way that your eyes might light upon his feet.

Kert's eyes flashed hawk-fire.

"Spring Mission is far more important to the welfare of the People than any small inconvenience you or I might suffer. I hope you will consider these requests as challenges, Kertis, rather than as restrictions." Daimler bared sharp little teeth. He faded.

Kert stared at the viewscreen with futile rage. He pulled off his gauntlets, stared at the taut, fragile new skin of his hands, vulnerable, cracking.

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He would lodge official protest. The gauntlets were a necessity to protect his fragile new skin from injury and infection. He would —

His fists crashed upon the serving counter. He would lodge no protest. He would uncover his hands and his eyes. He would unbuckle his chronometer until the red strap could be replaced with blue or black. He would not presume to glance at Senior Person Ritter's feet. He would not speak until spoken to.

Furiously he flapped to the bathroom, sprayed his tender hands with medicated plastic. He lashed his hands through the air, drying the protective film.

That Ritter had been created Senior Person was a rare honor indeed, signifying that his work was so important that he was not to be frustrated in any manner, by any Person. That he served as his own counsel implied special gifts of perception and judgment — and signified that any lesser individual, normal or Special, must fall under his command while within his Personal radius. There was no question of protest or resistance — merely concession or withdrawal.

Kert stalked the apartment. He saw now how vulnerable the blue ship made him. He could not hope to win a wrangle with 'Drick Ritter. Even if he took the dispute to the highest level, he would lose his case — and his blue hoverdish. The dish forced him to accept indignities he would not tolerate if only a job were at stake.

He smashed the dark goggles to his bedroom floor and popped dark contacts into his inflamed eyes. He snapped the chronometer off its offensive red strap and slid the golden wafer into a pocket.

Jaw set, he launched himself upon the world.

He reached the hangar, and the blue hoverdish blazed out of the dimness. Kert felt his taut flesh soothed, his angers diminished. His gaze moved over the blue dish with joyous triumph.

V

Presently caseworkers trickled through the hangar. Kert initiated routine preparations for lift-off.

The roofport dilated, and the hangar emptied. His own preparations complete, Kert polished at the ship, intent upon his crested reflection.

Without warning, a second reflection loomed out of the ship's blue skin. There was a pair of wildly slanted eyes, a small, crease-calipered mouth, a nimbus of hair.

Kert whirled.

Senior Person Ritter regarded him from violet eyes. He was a

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bent, elfin Person, deeply tanned, wildly haloed with white hair. His coverall was violet velvet. Over his heart he bore a printed precaution:

"Do not speak until spoken to.
Never look down at my feet.
Do not serve me with a gloved hand.
Do not cause me to see the color red.
Under penalty of law, swift and certain."

At his chest hung the massive medallion of the Senior Person. It caved his thin shoulders. His voice was a windblown echo. "We meet again, Little Blue Hawk."

A beast leapt in Kert's chest. He scraped at his throat, uselessly. No words materialized.

A small, strange smile moved across Ritter's face, a cloudy shadow. He clasped his hands before him and moved the fingers in a quick, meaningless ritual. "Our good friend Yorber told you, I'm sure, that I am the Person who carried you from Rural America one Spring Mission many years ago."

"He did." The words formed weakly without material substance.

The cloudy smile drifted across Ritter's face again. "We answered a special call that Mission. We visited the community of your birth out of scheduled order, to relieve the People there of your care. No one could calm you. And your sharp cries stabbed the ears, each scream calling up afresh the mystery, the tragedy of your parents' fate. As I carried you screaming to the ship, I thought my ears would spout blood." The smile drifted away.

The beast leapt again furiously. But Kert could not word his demand.

Ritter touched the blue hoverdish thoughtfully. "You will see the place of your birth next Tuesday afternoon, if weather does not alter my schedule. You will be informed of the circumstances surrounding the tragedy—or mystery—of your mother and father.

Kert's crest flared.

Ritter hoisted a hand. "We must be airborne in precisely thirteen minutes, Blue Hawk. We will synchronize timepieces. Then we will speak no more. After lofting, you will fly directly into the sun, until I give new instructions."

When Kert did not acquiesce, Ritter presented his heavy medallion in the gesture of command.

Kert sighed heavily. They synchronized timepieces. And thirteen minutes later the blue dish skimmed into the bleak March sun.

The blue dish skimmed lopsided, listing heavily to the rear.

Kert scowled over the instrument panel in baffled anger. The ship handled like a badly loaded

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freighter, crabbing awkwardly, nose high. He performed a quick series of tests vainly. Frowning, he put the ship on autoskim, programming compensatory adjustments. The ship nosed down, stabilized in the correct attitude.

Kert scowled over the instruments. To his knowledge, the ship had been entirely in his care for the past week. And he had done nothing to affect its skimming attitude.

His eyes flickered over the passenger-check mirror. Ritter's reflected eyes met his.

"Is it a critical matter? Likely to force us down in Rural America?"

Kert sighed. "It isn't."

Ritter nodded. He clasped his hands and moved the violet-tipped fingers in the same nonsense ritual he had performed earlier. "Then I will dispense my instructions for the mechanics of our visits — the landings, disembarkations, boardings, loftings. My work proceeds much more smoothly if I conduct my comings and goings in certain prescribed ways."

Kert's jaws knotted. "I fly the ship the way it's got to fly."

The violet eyes slanted with displeasure. "I demand nothing that will compromise our safety. I speak of the manner and order in which certainly purely routine procedures are to be accomplished. I remind you that I am Senior."

Coldly, Kert swiveled to face his Senior.

The pupils of Ritter's violet eyes dilated enormously. Ritter spoke.

Ritter spoke of small rituals he would perform in the course of landing, of rituals he would perform while disembarking and of others he would perform on occasion when Kert accompanied him into the forest.

He spoke of rituals to be performed before lofting. He spoke of ritual activities he would perform while they were in flight. And he spoke of small accommodations Kert would make to those rituals, small cues he would take from them, small gestures Kert would very occasionally be called upon to make in cooperation.

"I do not expect your active participation in my rituals. I expect you to refrain from voicing negative attitudes. I expect a certain amount of intelligent cooperation. If any request seems likely to cause danger, you may voice your opinion. Do you understand?"

A ritualist! Kert spoke in syllables of stone. "I do."

Ritter was silent for a moment. Then he issued directional instructions, enumerated and described landmarks. "Today we

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will visit only solitaries," he explained. "Most of our calls will be paper drops."

The first series of paper drops occupied the remainder of the morning. Approaching high, Kert would drop the blue dish swiftly through the trees into a small clearing. Ritter would disembark with elaborate ritual to fold a sheaf of papers into the scarlet copper box mounted someplace within the clearing.

Then Ritter would prowl the clearing, head bowed, pupils dilated and nostrils flared. Finally, returning to the ship, Ritter would sink to his seat, breathing harshly. Not until they had lofted would he begin work at his writing board, scrawling rapidly, as if recording the substance of an actual interview, one that had involved face-to-face confrontation.

After their twelfth paper drop, noon hung overhead. Kert lofted high.

Ritter slumped in his seat. "Hold altitude while I rest. Then I will give fresh instructions."

Kert held the dish high and steady. Below lay the forests and hills of Rural America. Kert could distinguish lakes, tiny settlements, a few dim trails. But from that altitude, no human was visible.

Nor any non-human.

Kert considered the forest below speculatively. Why had they simply left papers that morning? Were Ritter's solitaries monsters and shy? Monsters and terrible? Or were they simply People?

"A little of each," Ritter responded quietly. "Some fearful, some fearsome. Some barely human. Some all too human." A cloudy smile drifted across his features. "Now if you will move us due west, we will drop in upon a friend for lunch."

Kert's hands froze on the controls. He stared at Ritter's reflection, and his mind groped at the answer he had received — to a question he hadn't asked. Not aloud.

Ritter's voice, distracted, echoed his instructions again. He bent to his writing board.

Kert's hands moved over the controls woodenly. He guided the ship, trying not to think.

The clearing was high in the wooded hills. Kert stepped from the saucer warily, braced for cold.

Moist heat enveloped him. He stared at lush vegetation. Vines dipped from treetops. Grass matted thickly underfoot. A cloud of insects boiled past.

Kert gaped at the apparition at the clearing's edge. The man stood like a rotting stump. A leafy cape hid his limbs. His beard was a tangle of vines. His cheeks were

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furred with brilliant moss. Only the foolishly broadening smile differentiated him from the vegetation.

The apparition turned and moved into the trees, his cape sweeping the thick grass. Ritter touched Kert's arm, guiding him

As they moved through the trees Kert wiped sweat from his face. His coverall dampened. An unnatural amount of sunlight played beneath the green roof of trees.

A small thatched cottage occupied the second clearing. With a swirl of his cape, their host welcomed them, beaming foolishly.

Kert's eyes adjusted quickly to the interior. Sunlight filtered through narrow slots in the rough walls. The floor was packed dirt. In one corner was a heap of dried leaves for a bed. In another stood a low plank table spread with food. Shelves lined the walls. Dried provisions hung from rafters.

Frowning, Kert looked back to the low table and the crude bowls of food. He stared around the single room. There was no fireplace, no stove, no heating unit of any kind. Yet the food steamed. With growing discomfort, Kert stared at their host.

The stumpy man strode into the cottage. The leafy cloak rattled to the floor, and all the sunlight in the cottage focused upon the naked, mossy form of their host. Golden rays lit him, leaving the rest of the room in darkness. His face was a piece of weathered wood, carved in lines of foolish pride.

He bared his ruined teeth and beamed. "My food is your food." With a sunstruck hand, he motioned them to the low table.

Ritter slid into place. Kert knelt beside him warily. Opposite, their host sank down in a blaze of sunlight. His eyes had become golden orbs, molten. The food sent up a fresh cloud of steam. Kert's forehead dampened in response.

"We are grateful for your hospitality," Ritter murmured. He set his tongue to a spoonful of steaming food. Involuntarily he winced.

Their host scowled. "You are cold. Your food needs more heat." He focused his golden orbs upon the table top.

Kert gasped, his face seared.

Ritter's voice cut crisply through the steam. "We need less heat, John. Our food is too hot."

Anger boiled in the golden orbs. The viny beard flapped indignantly. "You need hot food and warm shelter. You are too cold to function."

Ritter's violet eyes dilated commandingly. "We cannot accept more heat, John. We cannot accommodate these abrupt

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and radical temperature changes."

John's voice echoed hollowly. "I burned away winter so you could make your Mission here. I focused sunlight. I melted the snows and made water to feed the plants. I made the mosses proliferate, the vines flourish, the trees prosper. Now you say you do not need my heat?" His naked chest swelled indignantly.

Ritter bowed his head. "We are grateful, John. But we ask you to respect our pride. We are only men. If you give us too much of your light, too much of your heat, we feel even smaller and more helpless than we are." The violet eyes slanted persuasively. "You have already given us warmth and springtime, John. Don't give us more. Don't diminish us further in your presence."

John's eyes flared. He swelled mightily, mollified. He rumbled with woody resonance, "I am your God."

The room cooled quickly. John blazed with the absorbed heat, then scattered it to light the darkened cottage.

Ritter inclined his head gratefully. "As we eat, Kert, we must reflect upon all that John has done for us."

John beamed. Kert shivered in his sweat-soaked coverall.

Despite the chill, the food remained hot through the long meal. As they ate, Ritter and John discussed the winter's weather. Ritter produced a pouch of weather tapes. They played choice strips and discussed statistics. Finally they considered the possible course of the summer's weather.

The meal was done. John rose. "Your visit was appreciated, Person. Ritter. I have not yet decided how I will conduct the next winter. I will think, as I heat the forest for summer. When you pay your autumn call, I may have good news for you."

"We will be grateful if you find it in your heart to temper the cold," Ritter murmured.

John beamed benevolently. "I make no promises. We will discuss it at Fall Misson."

Escaping, Kert and Ritter waded heat waves to the ship. Ritter collapsed in his seat. Kert worked the controls with slippery hands.

They reached skim altitude. Ritter croaked, "Hold."

The ship cooled quickly. Ritter's face regained color.

VI

They spent early afternoon retrieving papers they had dropped that morning. In late afternoon, they dropped into a clearing ominously reminiscent of John's. Strapping young oaks fenced the clearing. Underfoot,

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seedlings broke soil aggressively.

Ritter's wiry body tightened. "I'll ask you to accompany me again, Blue Hawk. You must observe great care. Our friend here is meek and humble. He doesn't realize the magnitude of the forces he controls."

Kert peered warily into the dense growth.

As they moved through the trees, they heard a distant voice raised plaintively. "At one time Twig worked in a tree nursery," Ritter explained. "When it became apparent that he couldn't remain there without endangering others, the Bureau evacuated him here. He has a demanding role to fill, rendering worship to all the trees on this hillside. From the tone of today's hymn, I conclude he has suffered a failure."

The sorrowful wail quavered through the trees. Pale crystals of sound rattled mournfully to the forest floor.

They stepped over a log into a small clearing. A newly fallen branch, leaves wilting, filled the clearing. The slight, pale young man flung himself about the stricken limb, mourning it with penitential fervor. His eyes jerked convulsively. His hair grew rough and brown down his neck, like the bark of a tree.

Finally his voice broke. He collapsed across the fallen limb.

Ritter spoke quietly. "Evidently you've neglected your duties here, Twig. This is too fine a branch to have been wrenched off by the wind."

Twig scrambled to his feet, a scrawny youth. His eyes jerked rapidly. "I know my sins! But I couldn't prevent it! The wind just came — tearing!" He choked. "I've been here two days, trying to atone. I've prostrated myself. I've — "

"And while you've atoned, you have also neglected your other responsibilities. I felt the anger of the trees as I walked the path."

Twig's barky head wobbled. He whispered hoarsely. "There is a giant Root tearing into my garden plot already! I saw it yesterday, throbbing! And there is a Branch that sweeps down every night and brushes my shelter roof — threatening!"

Ritter nodded. "It was the same story in the city. You performed so poorly, the trees destroyed the entire nursery in anger. I hoped you might fare better here. The trees are older, wiser, a little more patient."

Twig shuddered convulsively. "Oh, the Trees have been patient! And merciful' They have permitted me a sinner, to worship at Their Roots. But now — " His eyes jerked in error. "The wind came out of the north two nights ago, whipping and screaming. It came like a giant hand, thrashing

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my Trees — and it threw this Limb at my feet! As if to show me I am not worthy to protect the Trees with my worship. Oh, I have sinned! I am a sinner and full of shame! I — "

Ritter moved to the primitive shelter beneath the trees. He squatted, drawing forms from his pouch. "Are you ready to make inventory, Twig? We must requisition everything you will need for the next six months."

Gulping, Twig squatted in the shadow of the shelter. "Will you take me back with you?"

"No."

"But I'm in danger here! I'll starve! The Root in my garden patch! And every night, when I try to sleep — "

Ritter slanted his violet eyes at the quivering youth. "I believe you are capable of persuading the root to withdraw."

Twig's face contorted. "But they hate me! They're threatening me! They want me to die here! They — "

"If you can't put your trees and their needs ahead of your own fears, what can you expect? You are their creature. They are entitled to destroy you if you can't render adequate service."

Twig's head snapped up. His eyes glittered. "What did *you* ever do for the Trees? Nothing! But do They come scratching at your roof at night? Do They creak over your head and lash out when you walk down the street? Do They mutter and groan when you want to rest in Their shade?"

"I'm not their creature. I've never failed them, because I have no obligation to them. They are indifferent to me."

Twig jumped to his feet. "You fail the Trees by never thinking of them. You fail the Trees — "

"I brought them you." Ritter stood, folding away papers. "Now, I'd like to inspect your garden plot. Have you made preparations for planting?"

Twig's eyes flashed. But he led them to the garden plot that meandered beneath the mighty trees. A living fence marked its perimeter, a protective encirclement of live roots. The dark soil showed signs of cultivation.

But from the middle of the garden a massive root protruded, an encroaching woody monster that threatened to despoil the entire garden.

Twig moaned. "It's grown! Yesterday it was half this size! Last week it was only a thread!"

Ritter frowned over the root. "What have you done to propitiate the trees? To persuade this root to withdraw?"

Twig moaned. His voice quivered as he detailed his chants, his hymns, his promises and his pleas.

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Kert stared distastefully at the distorted face.

The ranting ended abruptly. Twig stared at Kert as if seeing him for the first time. His voice went deadly still. "I know what *you* would do, Bird. You would dig the root out and destroy it. Wouldn't you?"

Kert considered the root and the man. He nodded. "I would."

Twig screamed with rage. "You! You're the reason I could not protect my Trees. My other-consciousness foresaw your coming. I was so overwrought, I failed in my duties. You are *anti-Tree!* Bird!"

The root fence writhed at their feet. The giant root groaned and throbbed angrily. Ritter tugged Kert's arm. Branches lashed down in fury as they loped through the forest to the waiting hoverdish.

"Bird! Your breed has always walked on the Tree — befouled the Tree — built wormy nests on the clean, pure Branches of the Tree! I foresaw your coming, Bird! Anti-Tree!" The madman flailed the ship with dirty fists.

Kert's hands trembled at the controls. The hoverdish rushed up powerfully. Twig ranted beneath them, inciting the trees. Branches lashed out at the hoverdish, whipping at its sides. Birds rose in fugitive flocks.

Then they were above the clearing. Below, trees lashed and Twig danced in futile furry.

Kert stared down in shock.

Ritter's hair stood in wild disorder. He fingered a rip in his velvet coverall. "I believe we made progress there today, Blue Hawk. I believe Twig has finally found a focus outside himself for his hatred."

Kert shook his head in disbelief. "He controls the trees."

Ritter nodded. "He controls the trees, and he is sick. But if he can focus his hatred outward, perhaps he can discharge it without destroying himself. Perhaps someday I can even return him to the city. Perhaps."

Kert stared into the lashing trees. The voice of reason insisted that it isn't possible.

"It most certainly is possible," Ritter said dryly.

Kert eyed him sharply. I said nothing."

Ritter touched his medallion apologetically. "My trespass. But I have no time for talk. I must prepare intensively for my next call." Bowing his head, he withdrew into himself.

His going left a perceptible emptiness in the cabin. The ship lurched violently in the air.

Kert whipped to the controls. His eyes scanned the panel.

Everything normal. Except — the ship rode nose high again.

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Kert checked his compensatory settings. They hadn't altered. Bewildered, he reprogrammed the auto's skim. The ship nosed down obediently.

Frowning, he ran tests. They told him nothing, except that the ship carried an apparent overload in the left rear. And there was no load at all in the left rear, no cargo, nothing except — Senior Special Person Ritter.

Kert eyed Ritter in the mirror, perplexed.

Presently Ritter raised his head. His face was drawn. "This will be my last call today. I will ask you to escort me again." His eyes focused inward. He issued directions tensely.

As they hovered over the clearing, Ritter performed his usual rituals with particular intensity. Kert eyed the trees nervously, trying to see who, or what, waited.

Then they stood on the forest floor. Face gray, body taut, Ritter moved into the trees. Kert followed.

The trail was marked well. They approached a mossy boulder that guarded a small cavern.

The woman in the cavern raised her head. Her eyes were dim, her face withered. But her hair leapt about her head in flaming splendor, a brilliant mass of red.

Ritter averted his eyes. Silently he inventoried the contents of the cavern. Wordlessly he processed requisition forms.

Finally, with reluctance, he pocketed his pen. His dilated eyes fixed upon the woman, demanding communication.

She leaned forward eagerly. Her withered mouth worked. Her flaming hair writhed about her shoulders.

Ritter shrank, his eyes fixed upon her brilliant hair.

Finally the silent communication was completed. Ritter turned away, a dazed expression on his blanched face. His knees buckled.

Kert jumped to his side.

"Ship," Ritter gasped, clinging with purple talons.

Kert helped him down the trail.

They reached the clearing. Ritter slumped against the hoverdish, breathing harshly. Kert glanced uneasily down the trail. What had they fled? Just a withered hag with writhing hair?

"No, no," Ritter protested weakly. "I ran from my own weakness." He pulled himself erect. "Never mind. We must loft for the city. We've given enough of ourselves today." His face had regained color.

They lofted. Perplexed, Kert eyed Ritter in the passenger-check mirror. Ritter seemed completely recovered. He set aside his writing board to watch the forest pass below.

Irritated, Kert noted that the

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ship's attitude had altered again. The ship nosed down, as if the heaviness in the left rear had eased slightly.

VII

They traversed the treetops, and the sun became a molten ball in the west. Clouds steamed across it in purple veils, then swept away. The sun flattened itself on the edge of the world, a bulging scarlet orb.

Kert turned at the gasping sob from behind. Ritter was rigid in his seat, breathing harshly. His face was purple, congested. His hands clawed his throat. His eyes stared, like violet marbles, into the dusk-reddened sun.

Kert abandoned the controls. He shook Ritter urgently, helplessly. Swiftly he rifled Ritter's pockets. The Senior Person carried no medication.

Kert turned to the controls to transmit a Mayday. But then he turned back again, his eyes fastening upon the warning printed over Ritter's heart.

"Do not speak until spoken to.
Never look down at my feet.
Do not serve me with a gloved hand.
Do not cause me to see the color red.
Under penalty of law, swift and certain."

Kert stared into the setting sun, as fiery red as the hair of the woman they had fled. With a harsh exclamation, he turned to the controls. Fumbling, he activated the sun filter.

The dome darkened quickly, as if a jug of ink had been spilled over it. The sun dulled to deep indigo.

Ritter's rigid body relaxed. His breathing eased. Intelligence returned to his eyes. He inclined his head to Kert in wordless gratitude.

Exhausted, Kert slumped at the controls. When the sun set, he deactivated the filter. The dome cleared upon darkness. Trees stood below like dark sentinels. The city sparkled vividly on the horizon.

"Now I will thank you formally for your services today," Ritter said later, when they had stepped to the hangar floor. "I hope we can continue to function this effectively together. I'll brief you on tomorrow's routine in the morning before lift-off."

Ritter withdrew. The hangar was dim and deserted. Kert caressed the hoverdish wearily. He paced around it. Inspection revealed several small scratches in the paint. Otherwise the blue skin gleamed as brightly as it had twelve hours before.

In the locker room, Kert discarded his coverall. He showered

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and zipped into a fresh coverall. He left the locker room in darkness.

Standing at the door that led to the street, he felt a warning hint, an uneasiness, at the back of his mind.

The hangar wasn't empty.

He turned, peered.

A small, white-haloed figure was silhouetted in the doorway that led to the office corridors.

Ritter. Kert relaxed, started to turn away.

But Ritter beckoned. "Blue Hawk, a notion came to mind today as we reviewed your life here in the city."

"We didn't — " Kert bit off his protest. Had he even thought of his life in the city, in Ritter's presence?

No.

Ritter's eyes glowed compellingly. "I explored your mind, of course. A trespass, perhaps, since I am not officially your counsel. But I consider you one of my own, in a way. I brought you here. I abandoned you to the machinery of the Bureau. Now I've come across you again, and I find you in turmoil. Even now, in your mind, I can distinguish doubts and anxieties that have formed since we parted a few minutes ago. Having seen a few denizens of Rural America today, you begin to question the wisdom of visiting your birthplace next week. You have doubts that you can accept what you may learn about your parentage and yourself."

Kert raised a hand to shield himself. The hand fell, weighted by sudden heaviness, as if his blood had turned to molten steel.

Ritter touched his medallion in apology. "I do trespass," he murmured.

The heaviness withdrew. Kert stared at Ritter. "You — you're the heavy weight in the ship."

Ritter was startled. "I?"

"You." Kert hawked to the blue ship. He leapt to the controls, released the compensatory settings he had programmed earlier. The powerplant hummed alive. Deftly, Kert lifted the dish through the port and into the night sky.

A brief loft provided the answer. Without Ritter, the ship rode level.

He set the dish down. He climbed out, puzzled but elated.

Ritter stared down at his own small body, frowning.

Kert narrowed his eyes at Ritter's body. Surely Ritter's weight could not effect the ship so oddly if that weight were purely physical. Kert formed an unspoken question. Is your weight entirely physical?

"I have always weighed normally on scales." Ritter clutched

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his medallion. "But evidently I have weight on other scales, weight I never guessed at. Perhaps only you and your ship can detect it." He shook his head wearily. "There is the breath of a universe between knowing and understanding, Blue Hawk. I carry a cross every day — knowing too much, understanding too little."

Kert sighed, suddenly exhausted. It was as if he received not only Ritter's verbal communication, but also a non-verbal one of doubt and weariness.

The communication ended. Ritter said tentatively, "I wanted to discuss your search for someone akin to yourself, someone you could know and understand — who could know and understand you."

Kert nodded warily. He remembered too vividly his furious adolescent search, his frustration.

"I have considered all that carefully before speaking," Ritter said. He fingered his medallion thoughtfully. "Three Missions ago, I urged a certain young woman to migrate to the city from one of the smaller rural communities. I can't promise anything, Blue Hawk. My evaluation of the situation may be completed askew. But perhaps — "

"Tell me!" Kert was startled by the sharp clatter of words.

Ritter frowned. "Her name is Dranna. Dranna the Crystal. I'm sure you've heard of the Flickering Candle."

The Flickering Candle — one of the more elite trance shops. "I have. I've never gone there." Kert clutched his medallion tightly.

"I won't describe Dranna's art. People come from every precinct of the city to experience it. And that's what it's meant for — to be experienced. But despite success as an artist, Dranna is still at loose ends in our city, still unfocused in her personal life. I think perhaps the two of you could develop a mutual focus."

Kert frowned into the violet eyes, afraid to begin dreaming again.

"I'm a man of few words," Ritter said finally, shrugging. "I've given you the name of the person, suggested where you look for her. I won't mention the matter again." Nodding, he withdrew.

Kert stood immobile for a long time before leaving.

They spent the week processing forest solitaries. Kert passed the time waiting near his ship, eyes searching the trees uneasily. True, the forest solitaries were not so much different from the Special Persons he encountered daily on city streets. But here a single Person crept through deep shadow, shaggy, furtive, fearsome. And Kert shuddered.

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At night, Kert slept deeply, too tired to think or to wonder about the girl named Dranna.

Friday, waking, he found his taut new skin had eased comfortably over muscle and bone overnight. His blood coursed with fresh vigor. He reached the hangar early, whistling.

The hoverdish sat in a shaft of sunlight. Kert paced around it, trying to recreate the emotion he had felt Monday when the dish had gleamed with promise. Today it merely shone, a small blue dish freshly painted.

Frowning, he spoke out his new name, Little Blue Hawk. The crystals, splintered to the floor colorlessly. The name had lost its evocative power.

So it was that morning he finally called on the magic bound up in the name Ritter had offered: Dranna the Crystal. He spoke the name aloft, aground, now in shade, now in sunlight. Each time he discovered fresh promise in the delicately crystallized syllables.

Through the day, Ritter worked with frowning haste. At dusk he spoke. "I have fallen behind schedule this week. And I must finish the solitaries before Monday."

"I can work into the night," Kert offered.

"And tomorrow?"

Kert nodded. "And Sunday."

Ritter smiled wearily. "No, friend. On the Seventh Day we rest."

It was past midnight when they returned to the hangar. They separated without speaking. Kert found himself alone in the street. He had been too tired to shower or change. But the stimulus of city lights stirred him now. His crest rose with resurgent vigor. His feet covered pavement swiftly.

The Flickering Candle presented an austere front. At Kert's approach, the entry iris dilated. Kert stepped through — and a whining drone sawed into his skull. He staggered. He blinked at walls that burst alive in vivid patterns. The walls approached and receded dizzily, spun and whirled, attracted and repelled.

The hostess stepped from a screaming sunburst. She was small and pale. She wore a black velvet robe which overwhelmed her small body. "Which parlor, please?"

"I — I came to see Dranna the Crystal."

"Cash or credit please?"

Kert blinked stupidly. A purple void opened on the near wall. He swayed toward it.

"Do you have your general credit card, sir?"

He escaped the void. He proffered his card. He lowered his

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eyes discreetly to the floor.

Underfoot, shadow stripes rippled into a spiral. Kert staggered.

With relief, he accepted his credit card from the hostess. He followed her into a dim corridor.

Blackness draped the walls. Overhead lights grew dimmer, until the hostess padded silently into utter darkness. Kert touched velvet walls to steady himself. He moved, disembodied, into enfolding blackness. Claustrophobic bands tightened around his chest.

Finally a pale curtain rippled into sight. The hostess nodded him through.

The icy crystal glistened on a high, velvet-spread pedestal. Kert stared, unable to look away. Though the trance chamber was small, the crystal seemed an infinite distance away. The still air of the chamber was frosty.

Then the icy surface of the crystal veined with violet, with green, with yellow and orange red. And the crystal was huge, blazing. Kert raised a hand against searing heat. The air crackled. Flames leapt from the walls.

An eternity of flame, and the crystal veined with orange, with yellow, with green, receding. In a moment it was an icy seed on the velvety pedestal. Another moment, and the pedestal was bare.

Kert blinked in confusion, emerging from the trance. He stared around the chamber, hardly comprehending what he saw. The walls were hung with sheer rainbow panels that rippled Dazed patrons stretched on velvet chaises or sat on silken cushions. Dizzily Kert eased himself down upon a cushion.

A high, wavering note vibrated through the chamber thinly; then taking on body, it materialized upon the pedestal in crystallic form.

Before Kert could glance around, his consciousness was drawn into the delicately forming crystal.

He floated inside the crystal, disembodied, observing the others ranged around the chamber. He studied his own body, abandoned on the silken cushion. For a moment he peered through the rainbow hangings at the small Person who sang. Her eyes were fixed on the ceiling. A rainbow of sound throbbed from her throat.

Then the crystal was stained with brilliant, blinding color. Kert rode away to the center of the universe.

He awoke in the velvet corridor. His mind brimmed with incredible memories. He traversed the corridor slowly, dazed.

Only when his feet touched pavement did he remember he had visited the Candle with a purpose, to meet Dranne the Crystal.

Frowning, he examined his

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memory of the small Person behind the rainbow curtain. The memory was blurred. When he tried to focus it clearly, half a dozen other memories crowded his mind instead.

Memories he had never had before.

Utterly confused, he moved into the shadows of dawn.

VIII

While he slept, his mind groped restlessly down strange corridors of memory, opening unfamiliar doors into alien rooms. Yet after two hours he woke feeling alert and refreshed.

Ritter, absorbed in his work, hardly spoke that day. And Kert, examining the familiar world with wondering eyes, hardly noticed.

Again he traveled the midnight city to the Flickering Candle. He braved the hypnotic foyer, breezed down the smothering black corridor. He sank to his cushion in the rainbow chamber eagerly.

Dranna's song rang clear and high. Kert had no time for thought. His consciousness soared swiftly, ecstatically to worlds he had never visited, worlds he remembered nevertheless with vivid joy.

But occasionally his consciousness struggled back to reality. Befuddled, he stared at the dim form behind the pastel hangings. There was some purpose behind his visit here. A purpose, surely, concerning the Person who sang there.

But no — no. There was no one behind the curtain. There was no curtain. He had come to soar. He had come to . . . yes.

Near dawn, dazed, he moved through deserted streets, nagged by the feeling he had left something undone. Something important.

But what? Finally, sighing, he turned back to the Candle.

The hostess smiled graciously. "We have just completed our night of dreams, sir," he said firmly.

Outside he slumped in deep shadow. He frowned, trying to pinpoint the reason for his return.

A slight figure brushed past him.

Realization flushed his face. Dranna the Crystal! He had come to speak to her face to face, Person to Person. And now she moved away into shadow, a small figure in dark garments. He knew her instinctively.

Kert's heart jumped wildly. Silently he moved after Dranna the Crystal.

She moved in shadow, avoiding the light puddles cast by overhead lamps. At first her pace was weary. Then she glanced behind

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nervously. She quickened. She glanced back again. She began to run.

Kert hesitated. Caution spoke — inaudibly. He would overtake her, explain himself to her, make her understand. He would —

But she was gone. With a harsh cry, he scanned the pavement.

She had disappeared.

A pale bubble bobbed up from the pavement, a dark figure at its center.

Relieved, Kerrt watched the elevator mount the building. It hovered, then sank down empty. Kert stared at the building's gray facade. His mind's eye saw Dranna the Crystal moving down dim hallways, groping for her key, applying it.

When she was safe in her room, he turned away.

Four hours later he approached the building again, laden with doubt and a single nugget of gold. He had stared hard into his mirror that morning doubtfully. He had nothing to offer but himself. And what was he? Frowning, he had considered his jut-beaked face, lined and pale; his stiff blue crest; his eyes, small, almost beady; the harsh crystals of his speech.

Leaving, he had selected a single bright nugget to offer her. Clutching it now, he stepped into the elebubble and rose to her level. Stiff-shouldered, he stalked the hall. He found the door that carried her name.

He drew a deep breath and jabbed the bell.

The door slid slowly. A small, shuttered visage raised pale eyes to his.

He clutched his nugget tightly, fighting his impulse to back away and run, never return.

The face was small and still, with feathery brows. Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "What do you want?"

"I am — Hawk Tahn," he managed harshly. "I've flown Spring Mission with Senior Person 'Drick Ritter this week. He offered me counsel: that I should make a meeting with you."

Her face opened then, quickly, radiantly. "You've visited New Bodel," she whispered eagerly. "You've seen my father."

"I — no," Kert admitted regretfully. "We've visited only solitaries." Seeing her disappointment, he groped for words to explain himself, to open her face again. "Person Ritter suggested — he thought you might — I might — " He faltered, defeated.

Then he saw she didn't listen. Instead she stared at the carpet between them.

His words lay there, whole, unbroken. He stared, his eyes widening. For these crystals shimmered with a tender fire never before

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embodied in words of his speaking. And somehow they expressed not what he had said, but what he had wanted to say.

The words evaporated with a sweet, fiery shimmer. Dranna raised radiant eyes to his. "Please come in and — talk to me." Her voice was hoarse, eager.

The apartment was inexpressive, furnished with standard issue unembellished. There was no clutter, no litter, only tidy bareness.

Her face reflected the same bareness, as if all her personality had been channeled into crystals sung by night for strangers.

"I — I just live here," she whispered, explaining the emptiness.

He nodded.

"But sit down!" she insisted. "You haven't had breakfast. Neither have I." She laughed nervously. "My throat is so sore. You do like milkshake?" She jabbed at the serving board nervously.

"I do," Kert agreed gallantly, although he didn't.

"For breakfast? Really?"

It was midafternoon before they ventured out. Kert had never walked the streets in company before. She was small at his side, hoarse and gay. And he felt all the things a man feels on the first day of love: exhilaration, pride, apprehension.

Their walk led them to the hangar where the blue hoverdish waited. Kert stifled a flutter of nervousness. He led her around the dish, pointing out its features, detailing its performance.

Finally he had said everything. He studied her face intently.

"It's — very shiny," she said finally, tentatively. She touched the blue skin lightly.

Disappointed, he escorted her back to the street.

Her hand crept into his. His disappointment vanished.

And at day's end, meeting his reflection in her eyes, he knew he was committed to a journey over lands uncharted. He realized she saw the same journey over lands charted. He realized she saw the same journey stretching before them. She lowered her eyes, coloring.

He arrived home hours later, the golden nugget forgotten in his pocket. He paced his rooms restlessly, recalling every word, every gesture, every warmly glowing crystal.

He slept little and rose early.

"Today will be unsettling, Blue Hawk," Ritter warned, when they had lofted. "You're accustomed to meeting the Special People diluted by the city's normal population. Today we'll plunge down into an entire Special Community. These People are the most

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Special of all. And their isolation from cultural cross-currents and their constant close association with one another tend to intensify their Specialness."

Kert nodded abstractedly.

Ritter sighed. He withdrew counsel.

Daydreaming, Kert settled the ship into the clearing — and emerged, into nightmare.

A freaky band of supplicants crowded around them, whimpering, demanding, complaining.

"I've been traspassed! My neighbor — "

"The Bureau promised — "

"My house burned, and my children won't — "

"I know my rights! I'm a citizen! I'm entitled — "

Kert clutched his medallion, trying to back away. A bony hand clutched his arm. Fingers picked at his coverall. An inquisitive feeler invaded his mind, a mental threadroot groping insistently.

He glared around. A two-headed man grinned puckishly; an earless crone glared; a child with too many fingers used them all to pull at Kert's coverall.

"Disperse, People," Ritter commanded. "I will not do business this way. I will hear you after I've made my rounds of inspection."

The two-headed man swore an angry duet. The child dug all his nails into Kert's arm and clung. A pair of women tugged at Ritter.

"Disperse!" Ritter's voice lashed them. He disentangled himself. He presented his medallion in the gesture of command, his violet eyes blackening.

The supplicants withdrew with poor grace.

Ritter's face was stern. He strode the path to the community hall. "Now you understand my warning, Blue Hawk. This community is one of the worst. Today these people will focus all their cunning upon the two of us. This is their day to wrench everything they can from an uncaring world."

Kert clutched his composure desperately, assailed by the alien character of the community, by the fantastic insistence of each citizen upon his own Special rights. He shuddered as the women presented their squalling, malformed infants with combative pride He cringed at the raucous disputes aired for Ritter's settlement. He fought nausea as Ritter inspected the insane, the cancerous and the senile in the infirmary, making notes as to which were to be lofted to medical centers, which were to have special equipment and supplies dropped in.

Finally the long day ended. Dusk fell. Lord Mayor rumbled importantly, "We still have much to discuss, Person Ritter. My wives have your dinner hot.

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Ritter bowed deeply. "My regrets, Your Honor. My hoverman suffers a rare dietary anomaly. He requires special provisions within the hour. We must loft immediately.""

Lord Mayor eyed Kert impatiently. "We've cracked corn and millet seed in our granary. There is no reason I can't provision a bird at my table."

Kert's crest flared indignantly.

"Blue Hawk is insectivorous, Your Honor," Ritter murmured smoothly. "He's completely dependent upon the city insect hatchery. My regrets."

Lord Mayor glared at Kert.

From high, Kert stared down on the village. Tomorrow they would descend to another such place. And he would have to acknowledge that his origins lay there, that his parents had lived there, had been of there.

Jaw set, he lifted his eyes from the place.

Soon city lights beckoned. Hangar beacons flashed welcome. Mechanically, Kert settled the ship through the roofport.

IX

When they had disembarked, Ritter spoke. "If you don't want to make the trip tomorrow, Blue Hawk, I will arrange a substitute hoverman."

Kert whirled, outraged by Ritter's trespass. "No! I *will* go." The words smashed to the floor savagely.

Ritter flinched. He staggered, gaping at his foot.

Kert stared, uncomprehending, at the jagged black crystal that pierced Ritter's foot. A gout of bright blood drenched his shoe.

Kert stared. Then he heeded the harsh rhythm of Ritter's breath, the unnatural rigidity of his body. Ritter's eyes were fixed upon the bright blood. His skin mottled.

Kert leapt to the ship's cabin, fetched first-aid supplies. He grasped the black crystal firmly, and it dissolved in his hand. Quickly he slapped a compress over the jagged wound. He layered bandages over the bright blood to hide it from Ritter's eyes.

Ritter's breathing eased. He shuddered. "My foot," he muttered.

"I'll get a medic when the blood has stopped." Kert lifted the compress, to examine the wound.

Fiercely, Ritter wrenched his foot from Kert's grip. He staggered backward. His eyes glittered. "You looked at my foot."

"You're bleeding! You — "

Ritter crouched, clutching the bleeding foot. He spoke from the far side of madness. "*You looked at my foot.*"

Paralyzed, Kert groped for rea-

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son. Finally he faltered, "I — acknowledge my trespass." He presented his medallion in the gesture of contrition.

Gradually sanity returned to Ritter's eyes. He glanced down at the injured foot, then away quickly. "Give me bandages."

Kert obeyed.

When Ritter had bound his foot, he clambered aboard the hoverdish. They dropped through the emergency port of a nearby clinic. An attendant hurried forward.

"I will expect you at the usual time tomorrow," Ritter said tersely, disembarking. "Unless you notify me otherwise."

Released, Kert lofted high above the city. Automatically, his hands guided the ship to the mountain shelf. He left the ship. He stood alone in icy starlight, disturbed. Occasionally he had nicked his own throat, cut his own lip upon a word materialized too sharply. But he had never given injury to another.

He stared out into the night, considering the strange, tender fire of the crystals he had spoken to Dranna yesterday, considering today's jagged black crystal of anger. And he realized that some power was unfolding within him, without his consent. Beyond his control.

When the wind had numbed him beyond thought, he lifted off the mountainside. That night he slept in the ship, head upon the control board.

Tuesday morning he showered in the locker room. Freshly coveralled, he approached the ship.

Ritter waited, his face pale, his features set. "I see you did arrive today."

Kert carefully avoided glancing down. "I did." "

"Then we will proceed as usual." Ritter turned away, limping.

Kert's heart pounded thunderously. He was committed now. Only a barrier of time stood between himself and his place of birth, himself and self-knowledge.

They lofted high. The time barrier melted. The sun zipped through its early morning arc, and they hung above a canyon-side clearing.

An insistent voice crackled from their radio. "Relinquish control! Ship, relinquish control. Release your auto-settings. I control air currents over this community."

Kert stared down. This was the place, this scatter of rude structures on the east rim of a deep canyon, this stand of trees, this—

"Relinquish immediately! You are creating turbulence!"

Kert's eyes picked out a high fence bounding and clearing, a heap of rusty equipment piled just outside the fence and an an-

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gry figure that glared up at him.

"Relinquish," Ritter instructed. "Otherwise he'll bring us down without consent."

Reluctantly, Kert released his auto-settings. He lifted his hands from the controls.

The ship dropped abruptly. It smacked ground with a jolt.

The fence shut them in. "Identify yourselves," the radio demanded.

"Bureau ship on Spring Mission," Kert snapped. He jabbed the hatch release.

The hatch did not slide.

Ritter spoke briskly. "I am Senior Special Person Ritter. My hoverman is Special Person Hawk Tahn, a native of your community. Release us."

The hatch slid.

The small, hostile Person who unlocked the gate, eyed Kert darkly. "I control air currents here. I won't take trouble from you, Tahn."

Kert bit back anger. He stared around the clearing, and his crest stiffened. The People of the community were gathered. And there was no welcome in the eyes that met his.

Then a small, plump man bustled through the dour crowd, his hand extended. "Well, *I* welcome you, Blue Hawk," he declared. He had a dumpling face, small eyes that snapped with intelligence, a mouth that smiled by turning down. "You've come to see the rim. And I appoint myself to escort you. I'm the only one who will do."

Kert studied the unsmiling faces that composed the landscape. No eye yielded to his stare. He turned to Ritter.

"I can conduct business well enough without you. Teller will bring you to the town hall when you've seen everything."

Stiff-shouldered, Kert followed the plump man. A score of unfriendly eyes nettled the back of his neck.

They left the clearing, angling behind the rustic community. "I am called Teller," the plump man declared, "because I tell. Anything. Everything. Anytime. Anyplace."

Kert eyed him narrowly, following.

Their path took them through the back edge of the deserted village. As they picked their way, Teller began to tell.

He wove the entire community, past and present, into his narrative. He told of the earliest settlers, those fleeing freaks. And he told of present-day inhabitants. He told of children and adults and elders, some dead, some just born. Every stick, every pebble was woven into the tale. Every tree had shadowed some tryst. Every boulder had been the site of some agonizing decision.

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Finally, into the narrative, Bluebird was born, wingless. She hatched in a crude nest-house — there, high in that dying oak. A few beams of the nest still stood, rotting in leafy shadow. Her father was a shy hawk who left his nest only by night. Her mother was a practical little Person, feathered like a sparrow.

The child? She was glistening blue feathers and an impatient song, waiting for her wings to grow.

Through childhood she sang her restive tale about the day she would fly away from all, free. In adolescence, still wingless, she revolted. She made herself hateful. Then suddenly she was adult, still bound down. Disillusioned, she withdrew into an inner sky, a sky where she soared free and high. Haughtily, she ignored the counsel of the elders. Arrogantly, she refused to concern herself with earthly matters. Her destiny lay above.

Then came the strange, angry affair with that earthbound man, Rad Tahn. He was a sullen blunt-spoken man, an angry man who lived from brawl to brawl.

They nested down together. Presently it was apparent there would be a third party to the affair. Despite censure, they declined to sanctify their union. The young hawk was born with a despairing cry.

His grandmother took custody immediately. It wasn't until she fell dead a year later that he come into his mother's care.

For a few days. Because that week a fierce battle erupted between the mismatched mates, a struggle more savage than any other. Possessed with fury, Bluebird uttered a piercing cry and plunged from their low nest. She rushed through the village, a vengeful blue flash, to the rocky rim of the canyon.

To this spot. Here she paused for an instant, wingless, arms spread. Here she uttered that last fierce cry and —

Well, some say they saw her swoop up into the clouds.

Others say otherwise. They say the brilliant blue blossoms that color the floor of the canyon every spring were seeded by her broken body. Certainly they never bloomed there before.

Shaking free of the strange narrative, Kert stared down. For below, in the dark, jagged rocks, bloomed a faint patch of blue.

He stood in the sunlight, staring down. Without thought, without effort, he had absorbed the story of this village, these people. He had become intimately informed of his ancestry and his origins almost magically, as if a richly embroidered emotional tapestry had been transferred intact from Teller's mind to his own.

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Kert stared down. Then he raised his eyes to Teller, that mundane man suddenly become mysterious, with his strange gift of communication. "What do you think happened?" Kert demanded.

Teller smiled thoughtfully. "I believe she lives on the wind, on the wing. I believe she's a bird somewhere."

Nodding, Kert stared into the vastness of the sky. He heard its call clearly now. It commanded him, drew him. He felt his body lighten.

Teller said gently, "I'll walk down to the hall now. I believe you can find your way alone, Hawk."

"I can," Kert answered.

He gazed upward. A floating, feather-lightness possessed him. He raised his arms and rose up lightly, freed. When he glanced down, the forest was far below.

Kert spread his arms, and the sky opened. Giddily, he rose until the air was thin and cold. He swooped down, a fierce, exulting cry breaking from his lips.

He swooped over the forest, hurtled low over an icy brook, then cleaved his way back to the canyon. He winged into its depths, hovering over the place where blue blossoms grew in feathery clusters.

He was light, free, a bird awing.

And it was all wrong.

X

Frowning, he settled to the canyon's rim. His body took on weight.

All wrong. There had been exhilaration and joy. But he had no desire to swoop away into the clouds. He had no wish to hawk over the countryside in lonely splendor. He was a man, not bird.

He was a man — with a machine. With a fierce cry, obsessed, he hurtled through the trees, down the path to the clearing where his ship waited. With an angry cry he caught at the mesh of the fence that separated them. Scrambling, he mounted it.

A fierce squawk erupted. Wiry arms caught at him. "I control air currents here! You can't loft without my consent."

Dragged down, Kert struggled furiously. "I lift when I want!"

"I have special dispensation! I have controlled this air seventeen years. I won't alllow — "

Kert struggled free. "*You will allow!*" he spat. The words were jagged, black. Without thinking, Kert scooped one up in his hand. He clutched it, a black crystalline dagger.

Cursing, the small man launched himself at Kert.

The glittering tip of the crystal dagger nipped leathery flesh.

The small man jerked away. A single droplet of blood popped

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from his throat. His eyes bulged. He flattened himself against the fence, clutching his throat.

Kert stared at him, uncomprehending. Then his hand registered the heft of the crystalline weapon. He stared down at it, his jaw dropping.

"Don't come near me! I'll let you loft. I'll open the gates. I'll — "

Kert's fingers numbed with shock. The crystal dropped.

By the time the crowd gathered near, the crystal was dark dew at Kert's feet. Kert sared numbly.

By the time the crowd bathered The dark dew evaporated. Kert turned, dazed. His eyes met Teller's. Groping, he put the question he hadn't thought to ask before, the question he now recognized to be crucial. "Where is my father?" That surly, blunt-spoken man.

A hulking hirsute beast, more bear than man, rumbled ponderously. "It was my brother he murdered, Rad Tahn. His body is in the ground, with my arrow in his heart." His black eyes glittered defiantly. "And I saw the thing he killed with, Rad Tahn. I was there. I saw."

Kert turned back to Teller.

Teller sighed. "I'll lead you."

The marker was primitive, crudely chiseled.

"Here lies Rad Tahn,
Who in the 37th year
Of his life
Foully battered and
murdered
Karter Karter,
With a blunt word
Of his own speaking."

Kert knelt. He stared at the marker. Finally, rising, he nodded his understanding.

Teller spoke quietly. "This death — Rad Tahn's — marked a turning point in our ways. Before, we lived under natural law. If a man killed, he was given to his victim's kin. But after Rad Tahn was done to death, controversy arose. Was it possible to beat a man to death with a bluntly spoken word? Could any man, however Special, speak a murderer's club? Why did no one but Krick Karter see the alleged club?"

"I did see it!" Krick Karter rumbled. "I stood there beside my brother when he tried to collect the debt Rad Tahn owed him. I saw Rad Tahn curse out that — that glassy clug and batter my brother with it. And I put my arrow in Rad Tahn's heart for it."

Teller spoke reasonably. "But Person Ritter was not here to look into Rad Tahn's mind and tell us what guilt was there. We have only your word. No one else saw the club."

"It melted! Like a club of ice. It melted on the floor."

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"No one saw a puddle, Karter. It was a draught year, hot and dry. No one was spilling water around that summer. Any one of us would have noticed a puddle — and no one did."

Angrily, Krick Karter glared at them all. Harsh fur rose at the back of his neck. He lumbered away.

The man who controlled air currents declared passionately, "I always thought Krick Karter was drunk that night. Now I know I have done him trespass." He scurried after Karter.

"Now what d'ye make of that?" an elderly man mused.

Kert frowned, at the focus of all eyes. Were they blind? Hadn't they seen the dagger in his hand? Hadn't they seen the black dew in the grass?

"Even here People don't always accept the improbable," Ritter murmured. "What they saw — or believe they saw — was a struggle between two men. One of them panicked and broke away."

Kert studied the bemused faces. Sighing, he nodded.

Teller rose. He let high grass obscure Rad Tahn's gravestone. "Now I've told you everything, Blue Hawk. More than I intended to tell." He smiled regretfully.

Solemnly, Kert made his thanks to Teller. The villagers withdrew, gossiping through the graveyard.

Ritter's eyes slanted thoughtfully. "May I count on you to loft me at sundown?"

Kert spoke absently, staring down into the grass. "You may."

Kert stood alone. He returned to the clearing slowly, lost in thought.

The ship lifted lightly, sweetly, freed at last from gravity.

For an hour they rode the wind, sweeping the sky aimlessly. Kert considered the facts he needed to consider, thought the thoughts he needed to think.

Then a towering cloud formation reared in the west. The ship cut through the sky and soared to the cloud's lofty top. Spiralling, they spun down through the cloudy tower. The ship's gleaming blue skin became Kert's own. Cloudy mist chilled his flesh, frosted his crest.

They dropped out of the cloudy tower into brilliant sunlight. The earth spread below, sparkling and serene. The time for thought was past. Now was the time to be.

Kert threw back his head. An exultant cry exploded up his throat. It was the cry of a hawk never before seen over the land, not a harsh cry, not a cutting cry — but a sparkle of diamonds, showering to earth, brilliant with promise and joy.

—SYDNEY VAN SCYOC

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THE OPEN SECRETS

by LARRY EISENBERG

The computer's secrets were guarded so that only a trillion-to-one chance could disclose them . . . and one did!

My greatest error was in letting Duckworth into the computer room. But it had never occurred to me that he would ask so many questions and provoke me into trying the forbidden.

"The computer looks mighty small to me," he said. "Where are the memory banks for data storage?"

"Most of our memory is not here," I said. "We store all long term data and our programs in the Federal Computer Memory Bank. We have an access terminal that permits us to retrieve whatever information we want."

"Suppose another customer wants to reach the bank at the same time?"

"There's a time-sharing arrangement," I said patiently. "We fit our requests into the time gaps not used by other people and they do the same."

Duckworth stood there, bemused.

"The Bank must have lots of room," he said.

I smiled. "The FCMB has the largest memory capacity of any such unit on Earth. It stores the files of every Federal agency, bank records, department store inventories, university research notes, practically everything that maeks this country tick."

Duckworth seemed perturbed.

"How do you insure privacy?"

"By coding," I said. "A two-

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word signature is required to gain entry to a section of the memory bank. Each word is made up of fourteen bits, making a total of twenty-eight bits."

"Then the odds are about one hundred million to one against a chance guess."

"True," I said, "but those are mighty big odds."

"What if I entered someone else's code by mistake?" said Duckworth.

"Nothing would happen. A countersign code is necessary which requires another fourteen bits. That ups the odds by another ten thousand to one."

Duckworth shook his head.

"I still don't like it," he said.

I was annoyed by his obstinacy and responded by behaving childishly.

"Here," I said. "I'll let you enter any two fourteen-bit words. Go ahead and set the switches in some random sequence of ones and zeroes."

Duckworth seemed startled at my suggestion but he complied. I entered his sequence into the accumulator. The Confirm register lit up.

"What does that mean?" said Duckworth.

I bit my lip.

"Oddly enough you stumbled on somebody's code. But now you have to choose another fourteen bits. You'll get an *incorrect confirm* and have to start all over again. As you can see, the probability of anything going wrong is fantastically tiny."

"But *finite*," said Duckworth and he entered another fourteen bits at random.

It was at this point that the output printer started up and did not stop until it was too late. For a moment I was too stunned to move, but Duckworth wasn't inhibited at all. He went over to the printer and began to scan the neat rows of letters. His brow furrowed, his eyes closed, then he began to chuckle quietly. Finally, he roared with laughter.

"What is it?" I said.

I became terribly frightened and I knew that I didn't want to read the printed out material.

"What is it?" I repeated, with less conviction.

"You won't believe it," said Duckworth, "but we've got the confidential files of the Federal Investigation Bureau."

"The FIB?" I said. I felt the blood draining out of my head. "Turn off the damned printer!" I yelled.

Duckworth restrained me.

"Don't get hysterical," he said. "It's fun to read."

As I said, I was terribly frightened, but even more curious. So I decided to let the printer run for just another minute or two.

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It was to prove my undoing.

"Look at this!" said Duckworth. "It's about the President."

I looked at that and countless other forbidden accumulations of hearsay and unconfirmed data which had been painstakingly put together over the years.

"I can't believe this stuff," I said.

"I can," said Duckworth. "It confirms what I always suspected."

About a half hour later, Duckworth found some items concerning himself and he flew into a rage.

"All lies," he cried, "everything here. My trip to Wadam was purely to do chemistry. I hardly ever saw the Nazir's harem."

I tried to see what was being printed out but Duckworth kept me at bay with one knobby hand. Suddenly he stopped reading and looked directly at me.

"Do you realize what a powerful blackmailing weapon is in our hands?" he said.

"You don't really mean that, do you?"

"I damn well do," said Duckworth. "All of this dirt could turn the country upside down." Then he shrugged. "But I'm a chemist, not a blackmailer. Still, if we ever spilled these beans, there'd be hell to pay."

"Turn it off," I said. "We've seen enough."

At that point I received an urgent call from President Hinkle's secretary. The president was ready to discuss the computer budget for the following fiscal year.

"I must leave at once," I said. "So I want you to turn off the printer, hit the Clear Register button and get the hell out of here. And take all of that copy with you and burn it."

"You can trust me," said Duckworth and like a fool I did.

When I came back, two hours later, one of the graduate students was at the console. We nodded to one another. I surreptitiously went through the waste basket behind the printer and all of the lively stuff was gone. I sighed in gratitude and went home. But all that night, ideas flitted through my mind, fantasies of what I could have done with all that dirt.

The first sight of two strangers, the following afternoon, knotted my stomach again. Gumshoes look the same no matter what agency they represent. And these two, I surmised, were FIB'ers. I was right, of course.

They did not get directly to the point.

"I'd like to see your computer time schedule for yesterday," said the smoother of the pair after flashing his identity card. His

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name, it said, was Dunnigan.

"Why?" I said, trying to figure out what to do next. The time schedule would show that Duckworth was slotted in for the hours to two to four P.M.

Dunnigan's companion, an apple-cheeked bumpkin with protruding starched linen cuffs, smiled at me amiably. What was I to do? I apologized later to Duckworth, but he refused to listen to me.

"You could have substituted another time sheet," he said petulantly, "one with the time slot left blank."

Of course it was easy enough for him to say. But they'd have discovered the truth, sooner or later. We all went directly to Duckworth's laboratory in the Chemistry building. At first he denied everything.

"Look," said Dunnigan at last, "we know that our files in the Memory Bank were searched for an hour and a half during the time you were at the console. We also know that the Interrogate command came from this university's computer. Give us back the printed out data, tell us how you discovered our code, and we will recommend that you get off lightly."

"You won't believe this," said Duckworth. "I don't know your code. My entries were purely by chance."

For the first time Dunnigan smiled and his companion slapped at his thigh in high humor. "The chance of doing that," said Dunnigan "are about one in a trillion."

Duckworth smiled sweetly.

"But there is that *one* chance, isn't there?"

"Where is the printed data?" said Dunnigan.

"I burned all of it," said Duckworth.

They didn't believe any of his story. I confirmed the fact that he had hit on the code by pure luck. That simply made me an accomplice and I found myself in a cell adjoining that of Duckworth's. Because of the severity of the charges, we were both held without bail. At first there was not much talk between us. I hated his guts for getting me into this stupid mess. And he kept humming merrily to himself.

"Shut up," I finally snarled.

Duckworth slipped his hand out of his cell and worked it between my bars, where his fingers began to play against my spine. I pushed his hand away, angrily, but he was a persistent devil and resumed the gentle tattoo. Then it dawned on me that he might be tapping out a message in Morse code. I focused my brain on sequences of long and short taps.

"We're undoubtedly being lis-

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tened to," he said abruptly.

"Lay off the polysyllabic words," I said softly. "You'll ruin my spine."

Duckworth growled but he continued to tap out his message.

"I really did burn the data," he tapped, "but I stored the juiciest stuff in a dandy hiding place. And I'll never give up until my conditions are met."

"What conditions?" I began.

At that point three guards marched over, opened my cell door, and moved me out to another cell block.

"Is this nearer to the Chair?" I said weakly.

I was now all alone and I wondered what hideous torments lay ahead for the pair of us. But the expectation proved worse than the outcome. I was questioned again and again under hot lights but I kept silent. Aside from the abominable prison fare and a con in a nearby cell who kept playing "I Believe" on his harmonica, nothing untoward happened. In fact, three weeks later I was unconditionally released and so was Duckworth.

We shared a cab back to the University campus. I started to speak but Duckworth silenced me and nodded to the driver. As we left the cab, Duckworth took hold of my shoulder and pushed me along the tree-lined walk, simultaneously muttering in my ear.

"Just hold tight and say nothing. We've got them by the fuzz."

We went first to President Hinkle's office where our greeting was less than warm. He looked up at us, his great mottled nose aflame.

"You've put the university under a cloud and God knows what else. for the moment your suspensions are lifted. I'm allowing you to resume your duties pending the outcome of this investigation but I urge you both to come clean with the authorities."

"We already have," said Duckworth. I nodded. I have no choice but to go along with my friend. I went back to the computer to resume my rightful duties as chief programmer. But things weren't quite so simple. There was, for example, the succulent coed who asked for my help in debugging her first Fortran program. With true dedication I arrived at her dormitory room one Saturday evening, after hours, to assist her. She was friendly, even warm, but after biting my ear lobe, she whispered, "What are you going to do with the dirt you dredged up?"

I leaped away as though stung by an adder. Her eyes were wide, ingenuous, innocent.

"I'm getting the hell out of here," I cried, and I did.

The pressure become even more

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intense as time went on. The succession of flatfooted middle-aged freshmen, replete with beards, who kept following me about, began to prey on my nerves. Whenever I approached Duckworth our conversation inevitably went right to the weather, the Ivy blight, and how despicable it was to keep the faculty pay scale at a C minus rating. Duckworth would talk about nothing else.

Weeks went by, months, and I began to go to pieces. Absentmindedly I erased two master tapes, plugged a replacement card into the wrong socket, and burned out the power supply of the computer despite six heavy fuses. In addition I snarled at every student who came within six paces of me.

I could bear it no longer. I turned off the computer, card readers, tape decks, even the air conditioner, put up a large hand-letter sign which read, MY LIPS ARE SEALED, and marched over to Duckworth's lab. He greeted me with the usual weather gambit, but I would have none of it. I went right to his refrigerator, grabbed a few eggs and dropped them into a breaker of water to boil.

"You and I are going out into the woods for a picnic," I said, and my meaning was clear.

His face had turned ashen and he dropped the test tube he'd been examining. Then he sat down, loosened his collar, sucked in air and stared at the beaker of boiling eggs.

"Where's your courage, Duckworth?" I cried recklessly. "We're free men in a free land. God damn it, why can't we go for a private talk if we went to?"

He found his voice but it was faint and gravelly. His eyes had the luster of two lead bullets.

"No reason why not," he said.

Then he nodded to President Hinkle who had stalked into the lab, followed by Dunnigan and his apple-cheeked companion. Hinkle was mopping his brow with with a monogrammed handkerchief.

"Duckworth," he pleaded, "our fate is in your hands. Unless you tell these gentlemen where the stuff is, all funding monies for our grants will be denied the University."

"I burned the printout records," said Duckworth.

"That's true," said Dunnigan. "We found the ashes and the FIB lab reconstructed part of the printout. But we think you made a copy. We went through your notebook and found a peculiar kind of code notation."

President Hinkle put his arm on Duckworth's shoulder.

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"Tell him the truth," he said. "If not for the university, then for Science."

Duckworth's eyes were moist.

"President Hinkle," he said, "when I was a junior faculty member, we thought of you as the grand old man. It was your inspired thought to provide first year chemistry kits for freshmen. If I did it for anyone, I'd do it for you. But I want something in return from the government."

"I'll listen," said Dunnigan, "but I can't make any promises."

"I want the confidential files of the FIB erased," said Duckworth. "Judging by what it says about me, there isn't a single true statement in it."

Dunnigan's lips paled and his apple-cheeked companion almost swallowed his gum. For a while Dunnigan said nothing, then he cleared his throat and said, "The files were erased. It happened when you put that interrogate command to our memory bank. That's why we must have your copy."

"Fair enough," said Duckworth. "Do you know anything about my work?"

"Your macromolecule? Who doesn't?" I said.

"I don't," said Dunnigan.

"It involves a double helical molecule similar to that of DNA. The enormous coding possibilities rival that of the genetic code."

President Hinkle gasped.

"You hid the information by coding it into one of your macromolecules?"

Duckworth beamed.

"Precisely," he said. "I then put it into an egg, one of the group which my friend here just hard-boiled for lunch."

"That's why you look ill," I cried.

"I was ill," said Duckworth. Then he reached into the beaker. "The brown egg has the file information," he said. He handed it to Dunnigan. "Have one of your genetic experts check it against the code in my notebook."

"By the way," added Duckworth, "I have a fantastic memory. For example I can give you all the details on Senator Thigpoint, chairman of the Committee on Limited Wars."

He tore a page out of his notebook and using longhand, proceeded to fill both sides of the page with a nicely turned bit of penmanship. Closing with a flourish, he blew gently on the wet ink and handed the sheet to Dunnigan .

I could see Dunnigan's lips turn blue as his eyes scanned the sheet. At the end, he folded the paper with trembling fingers, saying only that he'd take it up with his superiors.

"Tell 'em there's more where that came from," said Duck-

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worth. He turned to me and slapped me on the back, jocularly. "Now let's have that picnic," he said.

In the open field near a rippling brook, with his transistor radio blasting at full volume, he handed me another egg. I was reluctant to eat it. What if it too, held vital state secrets?

"Don't be a fool," said Duckworth. "I didn't have time to make a second copy."

"Then why did you give them the coded egg?"

"Why not?" said Duckworth. "The hard boiling scrambled the code."

I was elated. The jailing, the hot lights, even the treacherous coed had all been worth the game. Then an errant thought struck me.

"Was there anything in the printout about President Hinkle?" I said wistfully.

"Don't tempt me," said Duckworth.

And opening a can of worms, we baited two fishhooks and sat down to an afternoon of delightful trout fishing.

—LARRY EISENBERG

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Star Dream

by TERRY CARR and ALEXEI PANSHIN

No man can ever build
another man's dream.

John Myers found a place at the rear of the observation room and looked around for John Lurie. He saw busy shirt-sleeved technicians, moving hurriedly as though the countdown were always a crucial three seconds ahead of them; there were stolid generals and a few administrators shifting uneasily from foot to foot, their features heavy with the weight of tense scowls. Here and there Myers saw others who like himself had actually had some hand in making the *Gaea;* they stood in murmuring groups looking at the varied views of the starship that could be seen on the screens scattershot around the room.

Lurie was nowhere to be seen, however. Perhaps he hadn't come down from his office yet; there was still more than half an hour to wait. Myers felt himself relaxing.

"Hello, John. I'm glad you came after all."

Myers started, then smiled in relief as he saw it was Irv Golden, one of the men he'd worked with on the project. He put a nod of greeting together with the smile, and shook hands.

"Hell, I couldn't stay away. You knew that."

"Of course. Still, none of us were sure. I mean, we all knew the situation with Lurie..."

"Even he couldn't keep me away from this," Myers said.

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"I may never get closer to Alpha Centauri than I am right now, looking at that ship."

The viewscreen nearest them was slowly zooming in on the *Gaea;* Myers was suddenly struck by how much the ship looked like a fantastic crouching owl. He stared at it, bemused by the illusion.

The *Gaea* didn't look at all like the manned Venus and Mars probes of a dozen years before, nor the one that had landed on Ganymede. Those had been conventional, intrasystem rockets; the *Gaea* was the first Dallmen Drive ship, aimed at the stars.

And she would get there, Myers knew for sure.

To the stars and back . . .

Myers had been one of the *Gaea*'s chief designers; he knew her insides, and he trusted them. He'd been ready to trust them to take him out to Centauri himself, and he still felt he was a more logical choice for crew position than most of the men who now waited aboard the ship. He was young, still in his twenties though just barely and he was in good shape physically. Mentally too, he thought with a stab of bitterness he couldn't keep down even now, seven months after the blowup. Mentally he was as stable as —

Myers heard the soft *ping* of the arriving elevator. Beside him Irv Golden stirred.

"Lurie," Golden said.

The elevator opened, and a power wheelchair rolled into the room, came to a halt before the main monitor screen and braked in place. Sitting in the chair, a fierce expression on his face, was old John Lurie, obviously determined to show himself undamaged in this first public appearance since his stroke.

Myers didn't turn to look at him; he could see the old man well enough without moving. The stroke had changed Lurie radically. He'd been looking haggard when Myers last saw him — tired, driven, almost perpetually angry — but he hadn't looked old. Myers saw with a kind of dull shock that the man's hair was almost fully gray now, and there were deep lines around the eyes, the mouth, the jaw. His complexion seemed unnaturally sallow — and it wasn't from the fluorescents in the room either; Lurie had always been an active, ruddy man, and no lighting would have paled his face like that.

"He looks worse than I expected," Golden said. "The word was he'd fully recovered."

"John would say that on his deathbed. Myers said and then was annoyed at the pride he felt in saying it. No, damn it, John Lu-

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rie the father figure had abdicated seven months ago. Lurie the founder of Intercorp (formerly Southwest Transport), designer of special landing assembly used on the Venus rockets, builder of the Ganymede ships and the Neptune fly-by . . . grand old man of space travel at 65, patron and mentor of the promising young engineer John Myers of six years ago, surrogate father, friend. All that was in the past, denied and destroyed in twenty minutes of furious, irrational argument.

Damn him.

Golden asked, "Are you going to say hello at least?"

"I don't know. I suppose the occasion calls for it — he did send me the invitation, or okayed it when the committee submitted the list to him. But hell, Irv, I don't owe him a thing. Not a thing."

Golden didn't reply, and Myers turned his attention determinedly back to the screen and the *Gaea*. Damn him.

He had never understood Lurie, though sometimes he'd thought he had. But rapport is not understanding; you can share an emotion, a dream, without knowing the man you share it with. Myers didn't even know why Lurie had decided he liked him, why he had gone out of his way to pry him loose from McDonnel Contractors with the offer of twice the salary and a position he couldn't possibly be ready for.

Maybe he'd just been cagy about that; certainly Myers had gone all out for the older man, and within half a year he'd been pulling his own weight. But it had been much more than just business; Lurie had taken an unaccountable liking to him from the start, and it had been a Sunday, Thanksgiving and Christmas relationship right away.

Myers had tried to ask him about it once. But Lurie had been Lurie; he did what he wanted and he revealed what he wanted, and the relationship was played by his rules. "We have the same first name," he said. "And you're bright, like me — brighter than you'd have known if I hadn't forced you to show it." He smiled briefly, a completely non-businessman, human smile, always incongruous on his face. "Maybe I wanted to build something besides aircraft and spaceships, John. I've always been a builder, you know, ever since I was a kid."

"The model planes, you mean?" Myers asked.

Lurie nodded. "They were one of the first things, yes." He opened the glass-fronted cabinet in which he kept the models. The earliest was a Curtiss Hawk biplane, obviously put together

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with painful slowness out of homemade materials. One of the wings was cracked, and paint was flaking from the body.

"That was a Navy fighter bomber," Lurie said. "I rode in one like it back in '35, when I was eight; my uncle took me up in it. It was a beautiful thing, as big and exciting as any five-hundred-ton spaceship we've built since. It made a fantastic amount of noise; I'll never forget it. And the shadow . . . That was the first thing about it that struck me, John; its shadow was black and precise and absolutely efficient. Mechanical. That was how I thought of it then; I was fascinated with opening up clocks at that age. I had no idea then how complex a mechanical thing could be designed — no idea at all of how many different kinds of components you'd have to put into an airplane."

Lurie paused, remembering. "If I'd had any conception of what has to go into a simple orbiting rocket. . . . Hell, John, I stopped thinking of rockets as mechanical things years ago; they're so complex you can't understand them except as a whole thing. Every one we build is almost alive to me now — and when we send them out, it's like me going out there myself. Yet they're still only mechanical things, like clocks. Funny, isn't it?"

Myers nodded slowly, caught up in the older man's mood. "I know what you mean about feeling like it's you going into space instead of just the rocket," he said.

"But of course it isn't me," Lurie said. "It can't ever be me, because I'm too old; my heart would never take the acceleration. The biggest man in the space industry, and I've never been off the planet . . . So I send out machines, John — mechanical extensions of myself."

Then they were both silent for a while, as Lurie turned the biplane in his hands, smiling wryly.

Myers didn't have to make the decision whether or not to go over to Lurie; after a few minutes Lurie came to him. As the old man's wheelchair rolled toward him, Myers realized he'd made a mistake in hesitating; now Lurie had taken the initiative, and he would control the conversation as usual. As always.

"Hello, John," said Lurie.

"Hello, John," Myers said. It was the old settled ritual, but neither spoke with any warmth.

"I knew you'd show up. Even if you only built half of her, you still — "

"The *Gaea* was over 90% complete when you fired me," Myers said shortly.

"That much?" For a moment

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Lurie looked confused; but the expression passed. "Yes, that's right. But we had to rebuild a lot of her. The entire guidance system, for one thing; she couldn't have found Ganymede with that dated system you had in her."

Myers felt anger rising in him, fought to control it. "That system was there only because you insisted on it, and you know it. I submitted plans for the modified system, but by then you were caught up in finishing the ship to meet the government deadline — "

"That was important!" Lurie snapped. "I never missed a project in my life."

"But you missed this one — after you fired me. You told me I was crazy, threw me out without notice, and then went ahead and did everything I'd recommended. What was the sense, John? Can you justify it?"

"I gave you six months' pay to fill out the term of your contract," Lurie said. "And I provided you with a reference that got you a job with NASA. If you work your way up as fast there, you'll be in charge of the next star-shot yourself."

"That's a nice thought for your conscience, but none of it justifies firing me in the first place. Don't try to change the subject again, John; I know you that well, at least."

"I wasn't changing the subject!" Lurie leaned forward tensely, bracing himself on one arm. Myers abruptly realized that the old man's right arm lay uselessly in his lap, noticed the slackness of the right side of his face. No wonder his speech seemed slurred, he thought; Lurie was fighting to cover it, but the stroke had left him partially paralyzed.

"Then why did you fire me?" he asked, and he felt uncomfortable as he heard the softness that now crept into his voice. Damn! This was the chance he'd hoped for for seven months, the argument he'd rehearsed in his mind ever since the firing. Why should he let Lurie off the hook now?

Lurie's left hand gripped the chair arm tightly, knuckles aged and white. "You were undermining the success of the project," the old man said slowly and deliberately. "You countermanded my express orders, you assumed authority I'd never given you, and your judgment was bad."

"Then why did you follow my recommendations after I was gone?" Myers demanded, forcing an edge into his voice. "I was right and you were dead wrong, John, but you wouldn't okay the new guidance system and you wouldn't even discuss it. The deadline, that was all you could

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think about! What good is a finished starship if it shoots off to nowhere?"

"I've never missed a deadline in my life!" Lurie said vehemently. "Never!"

"*Never?*" Myers looked at him in disbelief. "John, goddamn it, that ship sitting out there right now is six months late! How can you forget that?"

Lurie shook his head slowly, almost disjointedly. "I never missed a deadline before this one — and I wouldn't have missed this one if you hadn't upset the efficiency of the project. I had everything under control, we were on schedule all the way, and then you started coming in with complaints and suggestions, wheeling and dealing, calling conferences I'd never authorized — "

"I only called one conference," Myers said, "and that wasn't even my idea; Irv Golden asked for that one. Isn't that right, Irv?"

He turned to Golden, and was immediately struck with guilt at drawing him into the argument. Golden had stood by uncomfortably during the entire exchange, carefully midway between them. What the hell, he still worked for Lurie.

As the old man looked dangerously up at him, Golden said, "I did ask for the conference on ship's personnel — but I sent the request directly to you, Mr. Lurie. When you didn't answer even the second time, I asked John here about it. I didn't realize — "

"Of course you didn't!" Lurie said bitterly. "You were only the excuse he needed; don't worry, I don't blame you for it." He turned back to Myers. "You were so determined to get control of ship's personnel selection — what was the matter, did you think I'd go back on my promise to let you go on the ship?"

"The ship is blasting in ten minutes," Myers said quietly. "Am I on it?"

"Maddox, Juneau, Schumacher, Cossato, Faulkner and Howards," said Golden. "And of course you, John. That makes seven, and that's all there are left; the old man rejected all the others. That includes the stand-bys too. All of which means we now have a month to select and train four more men for the *Gaea*."

"That's impossible," said Kim. "They couldn't possibly learn their jobs even in the full month."

"No, not completely impossible," Golden said. "Some of the positions are more difficult than others, and we've trained the men we have to be able to take over other jobs if necessary. If we can choose new men quickly, we can train them for the easier jobs. But we have to start *now*. John, I

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don't understand why Lurie got rid of the other men, and I can't even get him to discuss choosing replacements. Can you tell me why he's putting this off?"

Myers leaned his elbows on the conference table, tapped the fingers of both hands together. It was an unconscious action, something to do so he wouldn't have to answer the question immediately. He didn't *know* the answer, and he realized with surprise that he had been avoiding thinking about it.

"*I'll* tell you why," said a voice behind him, and Myers jerked around to see Lurie standing angrily in the doorway. His black hair was unruly, his face tense and florid, the neck of his shirt zipped open beneath his tie.

Myers stood up, vacating the chair at the head of the conference table.

"No, don't bother," Lurie said bitingly. "You look so comfortable, I'd hate to disturb you. Sit down, John, sit down.""

But the rest of the men had already moved their chairs to accommodate Myers at Lurie's right-hand seat. Myers took that, and after a moment Lurie went to the head of the table and stood there angrily.

"If you gentlemen have any questions about project *Gaea*, I suggest you ask *me* about them in the future. I don't like conferences to be called behind my back."

Myers said, "I'm sorry, John; your phone had a call-later all morning, and this seemed urgent. We do have the room recorder on, and I would've submitted the entire proceedings to you."

"That's nice," Lurie said. "May I ask what was so urgent that you had to discuss it without me?"

Golden cleared his throat nervously. "It's the question about ship's personnel, Mr. Lurie — you'll remember I sent you two memos about it."

"I was busy," said Lurie. "You gentlemen don't seem to realize it, but we have just one month to get our bird off the ground. Unnecessary conferences won't get that done. How many of you are here? Five of you, all supposedly responsible men on this project. Who's minding the store?"

"John, I think Irv's question is important."

"It is *not* important; if it had been, I'd have called a conference myself. For your information, *John*, our bird will not be carrying eleven men to Alpha Centauri; we don't need all of them. As a matter of fact, we only need six; I put that call-later signal on the phone so I could go over the work assignments and re-allot them."

"Only six men?" said Golden. "Excuse me, but how can

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we get by with only six? You yourself set the number at eleven, and we all agreed — "

"I set the number at eleven, and I've re-estimated it at six," Lurie said coldly. "We're not trying to colonize Centauri; this is only a manned probe. Six men can do the job."

"But I don't understand," Myers said. "John, I'm sorry, but you will have to explain to me how six men can do the work of eleven."

"I don't have to explain anything! *I* make the decisions here, and I've decided six can do it. The fewer men, the less payload — and the fewer widows left behind."

"Widows?" Myers said. "I thought we were proceeding on the assumption this will be a successful flight."

Kim had been scanning the crew list Golden had brought to the meeting; now he looked up and said, "Is that why you rejected the men you did, Mr. Lurie? I notice they're all married."

"Of course that's the reason," Lurie said. "It's also the reason I decided to trim down the crew in the first place." He turned to Myers. "For your information, we always proceed on the assumption that whatever project we undertake will be a success; you can't make plans otherwise. But any new space flight is dangerous, and the *Gaea* will be going 4.3 light-years and back — we hope. That's a huge first, and the ship is the most complicated unit we've ever even dreamed of. Sometimes I'm not sure even *I* understand how she works." He paused, barely perceptibly, then went on more quietly, "John, I don't know if you've told the others what you told me last night, but you're not going on the *Gaea*."

"Not going?" Myers said unbelieving. "But I've had your promise ever since — "

"That was long before you brought Helen around. I like her, John, and she loves you, that's plain enough. If I send you out to die on the *Gaea*, I might as well send her to die too."

Myers stared at him. "You mean because I told you we're getting married you're taking me off the ship? Is that the reason?"

"I've been thinking about this for a long time. John, this is a *dangerous* flight; that ship is the first of its kind, and it's going out into — "

"For god's sake, I know what the project is!" Myers burst out. "I also know the *Gaea;* the ship can make it! *You've* seen all the plans — you know the theory — you oversaw the construction right from the start. Stop giving me rationalizations, John. Are

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you *afraid* of the *Gaea*? And if so — *why*? Because of that Venus-surplus guidance system that you refuse to change?"

Lurie's expression froze. He stepped back from the table, hesitated, then turned for the door. "I'll see you in my office, *alone*, in five minutes," he said, and walked out.

Within half an hour — shouting, accusing, pleading, shouting again — John Myers was not only off the *Gaea* crew list, but fired from Intercorp.

"All right, I'll tell you the *truth*," Lurie said, sinking back in his power chair, his face seeming to visibly weaken and sag. His condition appeared even worse than Myers had thought; Lurie had summoned his energies for the confrontation with Myers, but a few minutes of arguing had drained him.

Still . . . he was Lurie. Myers didn't want to let the old man soften him, too.

"All right," he said levelly. "What do you call the truth?"

"Just this: you didn't really want to be on the *Gaea*. You said you wanted to go, and you probably even believed it — but you didn't really want that."

"Didn't want it? What does *that* mean? Of course I wanted to go!"

"No, you didn't. You wanted to stay here with Helen; I could hear it in your voice the night you told me about the engagement." Even Lurie's voice seemed weak now. His stiff fingers on the chair arm ran idly along the power buttons there.

"Oh no," Myers said. "Oh no. You don't get away with that, John! You're trying that line about firing me for my own good, aren't you? Saving me from the dangers of space, the uncertainties — "

"Nonsense . . . nonsense. You know as well as I do the *Gaea* is as safe as any ship we've ever *built*. No, *John*, you just didn't want to go, that was all — but I think you really didn't know it. You couldn't admit to yourself that that dream of going to the stars wasn't as important to you as it used to be."

"So you had to manipulate things that day to force an open fight?" Myers said. "And instead of just taking me off the ship you had to fire me outright — is that it? I don't buy that."

Lurie's eyes were more than halfway closed as he looked down at the paralyzed hand in his lap. He said, "I don't expect you to believe it. If you could have accepted the idea of giving up going to Centauri, we could have done all of this reasonably, like two sensible men. You'd have said you didn't want to go after all,

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I'd have been sorry and I'd have let you off the hook. But it didn't happen that way, John, because we're human."

"I don't buy it," Myers said. "Stop it."

"No, let me go on; I may not have that much time. I'm not the man I was; I go into rages, I get paranoiac. You saw me just a few minutes ago. It was happening back then, too, when I fired you, only I didn't know it. The stroke finally woke me up to the situation. Not that it's anything new in the world. I'm just getting old, the juices don't mix as before, I have to rely on pills and power chairs and a diet you wouldn't believe either.

"I didn't manipulate the fight, John; I couldn't prevent it. It had been coming for months, and it was my fault. Okay, you were right about the guidance system; I was pigheaded about that. And you were right that I was afraid of the system; I was pigheaded about that. And you were right that I was afraid of the *Gaea* — it got too big for me, I couldn't understand it, it scared hell out of me. But none of that was insurmountable; I had good periods along with the bad ones, and I could back down if I had to. I did change my mind and put in your new guidance system later, remember.

"But what broke everything to pieces was when you told me about you and Helen — and I realized you had something else to do with your life. It was written all over your face. You didn't want to go to Centauri, you wanted to get married and buy a house and commute by gyro — "

"No!" Myers said. "I wanted to go to Centauri just as much as you did!"

Lurie just looked up at him silently for several moments, letting the sentence hang in the air.

Then he said, "That's right, you wanted to go just as much as I did. You didn't want to go for yourself anymore, only because of me. Because *that* was what I manipulated, John — *you,* right from the beginning. I took you out of McDonnel and gave you a top job, taught you as much as I knew, made you virtually a son to me. I told you once that I was a builder — well, that was what I was doing with you, though I denied it to myself. I was just building another machine, John, a more personal machine than the *Gaea,* a living person who'd go out to Centauri and be the closest thing to me I could manage."

Lurie paused, cleared his throat; his voice had taken on a gravelly edge. "That's pretty disgusting, isn't it? Using another

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human being like a tool, a glorified tv monitor."

Myers said wonderingly, "You really mean this, don't you?"

"Yes, I mean it; it's true. Why else would I have been so furious when you wanted to drop out? I was so touchy — so guilty — that you didn't even have to say to me, 'John, I want out.' I knew it before you did."

Lurie did close his eyes now, and raised his veined hand to press the bridge of his nose. Myers saw him breathing deeply, laboriously, and for a panic moment he thought the old man was having another stroke. But then he saw the tears.

From the overhead speaker came a voice saying, "*Blast minus thirty seconds and counting. Twenty-nine . . . twenty-eight . . .*"

Myers leaned over and punched the *Off* button on the wheelchair's console. He moved behind the chair and began to push it over to the main monitor screen.

"Clear your eyes, John, or you are going to miss the first blastoff for the stars," Myers said.

The power chair was heavier than he'd expected; by the time he had Lurie positioned in front of the screen he was out of breath. Panting, he drew up one of the room's lounging chairs and sat down beside the old man. Lurie had recovered himself, but he only stared at the screen silently.

"*. . . seventeen . . . sixteen . . fifteen . . .*"

"What you said makes sense," Myers said. "Except that people aren't steel; you can't melt them down and pour them into a mold to make a machine. It isn't that simple; nobody accepts somebody else's dream unless he wants it."

"*. . . two . . . one . . .*"

The starship built a cushion of smoke and fire beneath it, then slowly rose into the sky. The monitors tracked it as it accelerated; the changing angle of vision made it seem as though the *Gaea* were curving over and away. But it was still going straight up and out.

"You're right about NASA," Myers said. "I'll be on the next one."

— TERRY CARR and ALEXEI PANSHIN

YOUR POSTMASTER SUGGESTS:

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COLOURED ELEMENT

by ALICE LAURANCE and WILLIAM CARLSON

The colors weren't so bad
— until they became colours.

It's just not true that we planned it this way, as anybody who's read the serious articles about us knows very well. You can't believe those whoppers they print in the newspapers — why, half of them don't even know "color" is spelled "colour" when it refers to people like us!

If Ben and I had planned it, we certainly wouldn't have been shocked when we walked into that boarding house dining room. But we were. Not by the landlady — she was coloured pink just like me. Or her husband, whose bright red hue matched Ben's exactly. That we had expected. But when we saw that lodger — saints alive, you talk about flabbergasted! The man, name of Jarvis, was *bright blue!* And his wife was yellow! Not like Orientals, who are not yellow any more than Caucasians are white. I mean yellow — like a taxicab, like the middle of a daisy. Yellow!

Ben just dragged me upstairs and slammed the door — hard.

"Wh-what happened?" I said.

"I don't know."

"They were blue and yellow."

"Goddamnit, I know they were blue and yellow! They should have been red."

"Maybe you should have experimented some more before—"

He grabbed me by the hand. "C'mon, Miss Sally — something is radically wrong."

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Well, we started driving around and something sure *was* haywire. We saw crowds of bewildered and confused people. And they were red, yellow, blue, and *green*. Ben stopped the car and pulled a pad out of his pocket. For almost thirty minutes he noted the different colours as they passed, then added up the figures. As everyone knows about 45% were red or pink, 40% blue 10% yellow and 5% green.

Ben got that glazed look in his eye for a couple minutes; then he muttered, "Blood type."

"What?"

"Blood type. It affects the colour. Let's see, you're *O*, aren't you?"

"Why yes! However did you know?"

"Unless I'm mistaken all the red are *O*, the blues *A*, yellows *B*, and greens *AB*. Lord, what a mess!"

"Oh well," I said, "at least they're immune from measles."

"They are that," said Ben, stoking his pipe, "but it's still a bit frustrating. After all our work to make them red, here we are with a blasted rainbow." Ben lit his pipe and wreaths of smoke twined about his head.

"Science is sure unpredictable," I said, wrinkling my nose. I did not sneeze though. I never sneeze when Ben smokes. That's how I met him, you know.

We were in this elevator — this was up North in New York — and Ben was smoking a pipe and I wasn't sneezing. I couldn't believe it. I'm violently allergic to tobacco, but I wasn't sneezing at all, so naturally I looked at him. He was redheaded, very handsome, and he had the worst sunburn I've ever seen. I mean he was *scarlet!*

By that time the elevator had gotten down to the lobby, and since I had nothing to do, I followed him. I wanted to know what he was smoking, but I could not figure out how to ask him.

We'd gone about two blocks when he suddenly stopped dead and turned around. "Why are you following me?" he demanded.

I was mortified, but I wasn't going to miss my chance! "What's that you're smoking?" I asked.

"What's that I'm smoking? Why honey chile, it's jest a lil' ole pipe."

I hate it when people make fun of my accent. And this guy had the worst fake Southern accent in the history of the world. "I mean, what's in it?"

"What's your name?"

"Sally Vickers. What's yours?"

"Ben Browning. Do you always talk to strange men, Miss Sally?"

I looked down in my best shy Southern manner and shook my head. "It's just that it's *important* to me," I said.

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"Important enough to have dinner with me?"

"Well . . . Well all right, if you insist."

"Oh I do, Miss Sally, I do."

We went to a little French restaurant, and Ben ordered for us both, without even consulting me. It wasn't that I minded — but I thought it was *significant*. "Uh, what do you do, Ben?" I asked.

"Ahm a chemical engineer," he drawled. "What-all do you-all do?"

Well that tore it! "One thing *I don't* do is go around making fun of people's accents! And for your information, *you-all* is pronounced *y'all* and should only be used when speaking to more than one person. It's a perfectly respectable second person plural."

I wish you-all could have seen his face! "I'm a receptionist," I added with dignity.

"Oh," he said. "Is my accent really that bad?"

"It's atrocious," I said.

He started laughing. Frankly, I didn't get the joke. But I rather liked the twinkle in his warm brown eyes!

While we ate some marvelous *escargots*, I managed to pry out of Ben that he was California born and educated, had his Ph.D., was 38, single, and — judging by the looks he was giving me — normal male. Though with that sunburn how he could even think of girls was beyond me. But he said it looked worse than it was.

It was my turn then. But he just smiled when I told him about Bennington psychology major and my law office job. He said he'd rather hear about life behind the cotton curtain.

I didn't much like his phrase but I did my best to tell him about the beauty and friendliness of my home town. Ben acted like a man listening to a fairy tale. "Haven't you ever been South?" I asked desperately.

"Not to *your* South," he said shortly.

We'd finished dessert by that time, and Ben pulled out his pipe. "You were going to tell me what you're smoking, remember?"

"I surely will, Miss Sally. It's lettuce."

"Lettuce?"

"Plain lettuce leaves, cured like tobacco. Or almost like tobacco."

"But — why?"

"I like it."

"Where do you get it?"

"Make my own, but it is commercially available." He pulled out a pad and scribbled something on it. "Write to these people."

"I will — uh, if I ever have to. Thank you kindly."

"You're welcome kindly. Now — suppose I see you home."

He did, and after thanking him

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for the dinner I waited in the doorway, giving him a chance to ask for my phone number or say he'd be seeing me soon, but he didn't and I couldn't; so when he did I just said, "Good night." *Damn* being a girl sometimes, I thought.

Four days later — on a Saturday — the doorbell rang in the middle of the afternoon. It was a steaming July day, my apartment was a wreck, and I'd just finished washing my hair. "Oh *damn!*" I wailed.

"Now Miss Sally," said Ben, looking as neat as an unmailed envelope, "where's that famous Southern hospitality? Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Yes, of course," I said. "Come on in. But everything's a mess." Mess wasn't the word for it — there isn't a word for it — but he didn't seem to mind.

"You see, Miss Sally, I suddenly got this terrible hankerin' for hominy grits. So I went out, bought a box, and here ah is! You *will* cook 'em for me, won't you?"

"Why sure." I'm the South's worst cook, but I wasn't going to tell *him* that. I fixed him a drink and went into the kitchen to cook those pesky grits. That's when I first got suspicious.

You see, Ben's sunburn was exactly the same as before. That wasn't natural; it should have faded or peeled or something. I peeked out to make sure and he was as red as ever. You can maintain a tan, but not a burn, so I started supposing all kinds of things.

I finally got the grits done and brought them in. "Wonderful," he said after a bite. Believe me, they weren't — but he choked them down, smiled weakly, and said, "You busy tonight, Miss Sally?"

Now Mama's always said a girl should never let on to being available if a man asks for a date for the same night, but I thought: to hell with Mama. "Uh — no, not really."

"Good! Then why don't we go out to dinner? And later I'll show you how to cure lettuce leaves."

And that means going back to your place, I thought. I wasn't counting on his sunburn as a deterrent now, but I figured — don't remember what I figured — but I know what I said. "I'll be ready in twenty minutes."

"Take your time, Miss Sally, take your time."

You know, he wasn't kidding about the lettuce leaves. After dinner we went to his place — which turned out to be more of a laboratory than an apartment — and he showed me the whole process. After that we just stood there looking at each other — I wasn't scared, but I wasn't

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exactly comfortable either. "Uh—what are those?" I said, pointing to some covered cages.

"Mice, Miss Sally."

"Eek!" I said, since he seemed to expect it, though he should have realized I'd worked with mice in psychology. Monkeys too. I didn't mind a little old mouse.

But why were they covered? And what did they have to do with chemical engineering? And how did his sunburn fit in? Or did it? Curiouser and curiouser, as my old Grams used to say. I decided I'd better approach it sort of roundabout. "Uh, what company do you work for, Ben?"

"I free-lance," he said. It turned out he had a whole string of patents, mainly on processes connected with water, such as fluoridation and desalination. He'd taken post-doctoral courses in biochemistry and now was experimenting with putting vaccines right in the water. Well, that explained the mice, though not why they were all covered up. His preoccupation with disease seemed downright unhealthy to me, and how did that jibe with his — then I got it! Here he was: young, handsome — red as a beet. It had to be some mysterious and probably fatal disease. It was tragic. I was sure of it when he got me all the way home without trying anything more than a measley peck on the cheek.

We did make a date for Sunday, though. I figured if his days were numbered, this was no time to be coy. It was on Sunday I discovered I'd been right about his sunburn. It was no deterrent.

I saw him again on Monday and that was the day I decided I'd rather have a sick Ben Browning than a healthy *anybody*, and if I let this man get away I was insane.

Then he stopped calling.

I was miserable. I was frantic! I was out of my mind! I held myself in on Tuesday and Wednesday, and somehow got through Thursday, but by Friday I couldn't stand it any more; and directly after work I went right down to his place and hammered on the door. I didn't wait for an answer. The door was unlocked so I barged right in.

"Sally!" He made a desperate attempt to hide the mice, but it was too late — I'd already seen them. They were *shocking pink*.

"Benjamin Browning, what did you do to those mice?" I said.

"The same thing I did to myself," he said miserably. He still had the sunburn.

"I thought so!"

"It's why I didn't call you again."

"Why?" I screamed.

"Because I'm a Negro."

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"Well, is *that* all?" I flopped down on a chair in sheer relief. "My goodness, I thought you were dying!"

"But I never — "

"How did you turn red?"

"It's a side effect. I was working on a vaccine against measles which could be dissolved in water and taken orally, and I've found it. Except it turned these darn mice pink — and it turned me red. At first I tried to counteract it, but then I saw! Sally, this will solve the race problem! If we get people to take this vaccine there wouldn't be any races. Just red men. I was tempted to give you some — "

"How dare you?" I said, jumping up and stamping my foot. "I am not going to be turned red. At least . . . "

"At least?"

"Well, at least not until after you marry me. "

"What the devil are you talking about?" he shouted.

"Well, I understand Negroes get married too. Will our children be red?"

"I don't know. Damn it, Sally — "

"Hey, I've got a great idea — let's turn the whole country red!"

"It isn't that simple."

"Of course it is."

"The vaccine *could* turn everyone red, but I'm sure people won't accept it."

"They'll have to accept it."

"*What?*" he really shouted that word.

"It's perfectly simple. We get married and go on a honeymoon. We pick out cities — maybe a whole state — dump the stuff in the reservoirs and everybody turns red."

"It takes a month."

"All right, it takes a month."

"It could be done, of course," he said slowly.

"You bet it could."

"You're serious about marrying me?"

"You hardly know me."

"Well you don't know me either, and you want to marry me." He hadn't actually said so, but he did, all right.

The upshot was we got married three days later, I took Ben's vaccine and we drove off on our honeymoon. Two days later we immunized our first city.

The cities were easy — Ben just dropped his vaccine into the reservoirs. But lots of the smaller towns had standpipes, and sometimes he had to use his chemist's credentials to get permission to inspect the waterworks, so he could slip the vaccine in.

We spent most of the month dispensing our colourful little vaccine. Just before I was due to turn, we went back to the first city we immunized. We registered

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in a boarding house under assumed names, and waited for the fun to begin.

Sure enough, I turned just when Ben said, but I wasn't exactly red. I was more pink — sort of cherry toned. My eyes are gray — people's eyes don't change — and I liked my new colour quite well — except I couldn't use my old make-up.

Ben was worried about my new colour. He thought maybe it was lighter because I'd been white, and that wouldn't have been any good, but it turned out it was because I'm a girl. Women are always a little lighter than men, except for anemics. They're positively pastel, regardless of sex.

Two days later the whole city — which happened to be the state capitol — turned, and we got hit over the head with the rainbow Ben had created. After he figured out the blood type business, he put away his pad, restoked his pipe, and got that hazy look in his eye. I just watched the people walk by, and decided the different colours were rather pretty when you got used to them.

Pretty soon, Ben's eyes focused again and he said, "We'd better get back and see what's happening." We returned to the boarding house and turned on the TV. All hell had broken loose. A state of emergency had been declared, and martial law and a curfew were already in effect. Within the next few days, as more cities and towns began to turn, the whole state was sealed off "for the duration."

"It's going to be a mighty long duration," Ben said. "The only antidote is deadly poison."

What happened next is history, I guess. The Governor issued a statement. The President issued a statement. The Pope issued a statement. The Secretary-General issued a statement. Fourteen senators issued statements and so did twenty-three congressmen, and there wasn't a sensible word in the lot.

Among regular people, the first reaction most had was to take a bath — a lot of baths. Then there was a soap run on the supermarkets, until people found out that no brand would remove the colour. Then the Great Migration began. You couldn't get out of the state, but you could move around inside it — and people did. Every day — for a month — as new towns turned, people started moving. At first it was to try to escape — then most people who'd left home went back.

And Negroes — former Negroes — oh, you know what I mean — they just went. Any place. They soon realized if they showed up where no one knew them, they'd be just like everyone else. Some people say you can tell but I don't

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believe it. Sure, black people have kinky hair and big lips and flattish noses — *sometimes*. And sometimes they don't and sometimes Caucasians do. And even when they do, there are always plastic surgery and wigs and hair straighteners. So nobody could tell for sure after the change, and guessing was dangerous. I mean, just for example, the Governor himself had a flat kind of nose — college boxing, they *said* — and rather big lips, and everybody knew he'd been white since birth. Or thought so, anyway.

Once immigration was resumed, we had quite an influx of Negroes from other states hoping to catch whatever it was, and of course they did, a month after their first drink of water. Nobody could leave, though — the surrounding states had us in quarantine. And I mean they enforced it — you'd have thought coloured people were lepers.

The Negro immigration stopped, of course, when the original supply of reservoir water was used up and people stopped turning but even so, we went from 24th to 17th in population rank in just three years. Meanwhile, the Department of Health was investigating.

It took them a month to figure out the business about blood type that Ben had guessed right away, and it was the longest time before they tumbled to the water business. But then a chemist finally isolated Ben's vaccine and everybody started screaming sabotage. And once that cry was raised, it took just about no time for several of the Water Commissioners to remember the sunburned man who'd visited them about a month before all the trouble started. We shouldn't have gone back to using our right names I guess, but Ben would never have been able to get the loan to start his business otherwise, so we figured what the heck. Anyway, as everybody knows, they caught us.

By that time we were doing right well. Owned our own home and everything. Ben remembered my problems with make-up, and he put together a little laboratory and concocted powder and lipstick and stuff for the new colours. His lab soon became a factory and pretty soon he had 50 people working for him. His four lines — Goldenrod Yellow, Peaches'n'cream Pink, Crystal Blue, and Dixie-Belle-Green were all a huge success. Still are.

So, like I said, they caught us and arrested us. Then the legal fun began! In the first place, nobody could figure out what to charge us with. And when you come right down to it, what had we done? They finally had to dig

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out an ancient law about well-poisoning, which was silly because we'd never even looked at any old well.

They let us out on bail and our lawyer — who's red like us — said he thought he could get us off. But then the Feds had to get their two cents in, so they preferred conspiracy charges and then there was this big jurisdictional dispute and — well, nobody won. Yet. We're still out on bail.

Now there's been so much rubbish written about how Ben's vaccine is either the world's worst disaster or else its greatest hope that I thought I'd wind this up by telling what really happened down here. Does the vaccine solve the race problem? Well, yes and no. It solves the Negro and white problem all right. It's pretty hard to keep a prejudice in good repair when you can't even tell who it is you hate. But you see, the reds and greens and yellows and blues *can* tell each other apart, and I'll be jiggered if they haven't started putting out this colour superiority stuff.

The greens started it. They're type AB of course — the universal recipients. They said they were the elite, being only 4% of the people. But the other colours said if anything they were mongrel, because they were a secondary color, and they could take any type of blood. Well the greens came right back and said that proved their superior adaptability.

Meantime, our people — the reds — were proclaiming we were the best because we were the majority; but the others said that just proved we were *common*. And then the blues chimed in, talking about blue blood and the color of purity and all, which made everybody kind of mad. The yellows talked about gold and sunshine and pointed out that their colour was fairest and closest to natural — which was disputed by the pink women.

Nowadays things have begun to sort themselves out. Coloured folks don't mix much. Oh, you work with other colours, and the kids all go to the same schools, but they usually sit in different parts of the room, and people usually divide buses and restaurants and such into sections and don't mingle. Socially, there is virtually *no* mixing. You just make friends among your own type, and you hardly ever hear of a mixed marriage. It isn't prejudice. More taste. The colours do clash, after all.

I feel sorry for the kids sometimes. If they turn a different colour, or are born a different colour from their parents, it can be pretty rough on them — and on

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the parents. It's been much better since they started the Rainbow Clubs for people with different coloured children. They're something like these organizations for the families of alcoholics or retarded children, and I understand they do wonderful work.

Ben's offer to colour the whole country has already had so much publicity I don't have to go into that. I doubt if the vaccine will ever be accepted officially, but since the formula became public it won't make any difference. The last total I saw was 163 coloured cities and towns outside our state, and it's going up every week. Somebody wants this country coloured, and the laws aren't stopping him, and the guards at the reservoirs aren't stopping him. But don't worry — now that we have got cosmetics and the new fashions and everything, you'll find it rather pleasant being red, or blue, or yellow, or green. And you'll never get the measles either!

As for Ben and me, we're not complaining. We have an adorable little baby and we're going to have another next month. Ben Jr. is red just like his Daddy, and we're hoping for a little pink girl next.

I personally don't believe this stuff about reds being better than everybody else. Ben and I agree 100 percent that it's mere coincidence that red has always been the color associated with royalty and that the vast majority of brilliant and distinguished men in this country are red — or will be when they turn. Ben has said a million times — and I agree — that a man shouldn't be judged by his colour.

—ALICE LAURENCE and
WILLIAM CARLSON

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KILLERBOT!

by DEAN R. KOONTZ

The war was humane, as wars went. It didn't destroy nations. It merely destroyed families, wives, children —

The theater was a thunder-lizard's maw gorged with people, the seats jutting in rows of imitation teeth, casting black shadows in the flush of yellow half-light. The screen pulsed with colors, its rectangular orb awash with delusions. The two-dimensional inhabitants of that false, flat reality moved into view before a pounding blue-white surf behind the black and yellow and crimson credits that crawled like well-trained insects up the broad screen, always in perfect time with the tinny music.

And, abruptly, the air was filled with deadly steel bees.

Jacobs slipped from his seat, dragging Anne with him to crouch in the sheltered trough between the rows as darts rang against the metal backing of the chairs. He had his gun out, searching.

Carefully, he raised his head and looked about the theater, open to attack, and spotted the blonde. She was fifteen rows back. She had stripped down the top of her organdy dress to free her breasts, marred by the thin, red surgical lines. Below each scar were six pinholes: dartgun barrels that punctured the skin like gigantic pores. Jacobs knew the breasts were hollow of flesh and contained, instead, dart clips and firing mechanisms packed in a silicone shell. The war had just

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begun and already he knew the basic mechanisms.

He aimed.

The blonde whirled — not out of malice, but in her pre-programmed fire-pattern — twelve barrels swinging in his direction. Jacobs depressed the trigger. The automatic burped out three fragmentation slugs. They tumbled the blonde backward in the dark, a final sputter of darts ringing from the backs of the seats in front of her. . . .

Ringing. . . .

Ringing. . . . He woke to gloom. For several seconds, he was not certain whether reality was: A — the bed and the peaceful room clothed in gray light, or B — the half-darkened theater and the killerbot spewing thin death across the rows of patrons. He blinked his eyes, yawned, felt his ears pop. The ringing was the phone, not thousands of metal thorns richocheting off theater seats. He reached out, answered it. "Lo?"

"Phil?"

"Hmmm?"

It was Cullen. Reedy voice, whined words. He was second in command — first in command on this, Jacobs' one night off — on the Northside Sector anti-killerbot force and was capable enough to keep things purring. Or should be. . . .

"Seems like a bad one, Phil."

"Where?" He fought to maintain drowsiness in hopes he might yet return to dream-filled unconsciousness. All sleep was dream-filled now days.

"Medarts Building. Tenth floor. He's extremely well-armed. Darts *and* bullets."

"Both?" That sent a shiver through him. It was difficult enough to implant a single weapon system into a human body. Even with the new neutral synthetic fibers that composed most of the mechanisms, the body fought the rejection of alien tissues. Supposedly, it would never be economically feasible to build more than one weapon into a killerbot. Recovery and healing time required for *two* systems was six times as long. Half a dozen single-system killerbots could be prepared and dispatched in the same time needed to finish one double-systems bot. But if Euro had come up with a way to make it pay off, a method of reducing healing time. . . .

"Both," Cullen confirmed.

"Maybe you have two of them trapped up there."

"Could be. But I don't think so. Even assuming there are two up there, the battle pattern is unusual. They don't fire in a pre-programmed grid; they only fire when there is a target."

"Impossible!" It had to be! If

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that killerbot were firing at targets instead of on a pattern, it meant the damn thing had some control of its finer reasoning powers. But if you gave a killerbot reasoning powers, it would soon reason that it had once been a human being, that it had been stripped of its humanity, that its mind had been bleached, its stomach or chest or thigh contaminated with a deadly weapons system. It would revolt, surely.

"Just the same," Cullen said, anxiety riding his voice with keen spurs, "I think you had better come down here."

He gave up trying to keep his mind clouded and his body next to sleep. "I'll be there as soon as I can." He placed the phone in its cradle and pushed himself to the edge of the bed. For the thousandth time, he reminded himself that the captain of an anti-killerbot sector team had no real life of his own.

He dressed, struggled into his raincoat, and swallowed a cup of hot coffee in three large gulps. Then he went into the bedroom to tell Anne he was leaving before he remembered that Anne was dead.

Then he went and strapped on his gun.

Outside, it was raining. Cold rain. It sliced the hairlike fog that wrapped the trees and spit-curled the darkness. It crawled his skin with aching dampness, chilled his bones to the marrow. There was no lightening. The blackness was impenetrable.

He found the car in front of the house after first looking in the garage. The door swung open to the touch of his thumb as the lock recognized his print. Climbing in, he started the engine, swung across the narrow secondary road to the ramp of the autoway. Punching co-ordinates for the Medical Arts Building he leaned back, closing his eyes as the car maneuvered into the high-speed lane of the twelve lane autoway.

He took control of the car at the bottom of the ramp and drove onto Sycamore Avenue. A hundred yards ahead, a barricade slashed the road, ringed with portable yellow lights that bathed the slick pavement in ugly amber flush. The reflection of the bulbs in the ice-slushed puddles, curling and wiggling, reminded him of a carnival midway after closing time on a damp Saturday night near the end of the season. Aching with the realization that carnivals were but another thing necessarily outlawed as protection against killerbot mass-murders, he pulled the car into the shadow of the portable barricade wall. Bursts of bullets rang across the roof and down the trunk until he

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was shielded by the metal partition.

"Mr. Cullen said to send you right to the front," the officer said, openeing the door for Jacobs. "You're going to have to dress for it, though."

"How many dead?"

"Fourteen civilians. Nine of us."

"Nine!"

The officer winced at the implied criticism. "Nothing could be done, Captain. It opened fire before rush hour. Senseless, that. The first part of the staggered rush would have been coming down this street fifteen minutes later. If it had waited, it could have killed five times fourteen. So we went in with dart-proofs, 'cause it was using darts. How could we guess it would have two weapon systems? A dart-proof suit is structured to stop needle-point pressure. A bullet is something else again."

Jacobs accepted a bullet-proof jacket from a second man, laced the front tightly shut and hung a heavy bibb over the lacing. The officers helped him into a pair of bulky slacks of thick, cross-hatched nylon pressure resistants. "Tell Cullen I'm coming through," he said, shuffling uncomfortably toward the edge of the barricade, slipping the bulky nylon-steel mesh hood over his head.

A hundred yards of bare street stretched between this barricade and the next. The second implacement was a portable metal well behind which Cullen and four officers crouched, watching the tenth floor of the Medarts Building through tiny lenses imbedded in the portable barrier. Cullen, radio to ear, looked back at the first barricade as he learned of Jacob's arrival. A moment later, he and the other four men opened fire on the tenth floor window, providing Jacobs with a sort of cover.

Jacobs shuffled around the barrier and began a labored progress across the no-man's land.

Yellow light danced over his shoulders and shivered in the puddles, shattering like glass when he slopped the icy water with his feet.

He was thirty yards along before the killerbot saw him and turned its attention from the men at the barricade to him. There was a tinkling of darts against the rough fiber of the suit. But they fell away like wind-driven dandelion puffs suddenly deprived of propulsion. Quickly sensing the uselessness of the dart weapon, the killerbot opened fire with its frag slugs.

But that was impossible! Killerbots couldn't reason like that! If they could, they certainly

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would revolt at having been used for disposal weapon carriers. Take a man; bleach his brain; throw away his memory, crumpled and useless; program him with basic human habits and an automatic, unsensing minor vocabularly; program him with a destruction mission; turn him loose. That is a killerbot. It can't reason in the heat of battle. Or never had been able to before....

The bullets weren't penetrating the heavy armor, but they rained down too fast to let him walk a straight line to the front barricade. It was like walking in a raging wind, a spurting progress, unsteady and unsure.

For a short moment, the bullets stopped. —Jacobs doubled his efforts and shuffled faster, passing the halfway mark.

Kack-ack-ack! A fantastic barrage of shells tore against his chest, toppling him. The suit still held, but he had had the wind knocked from him. He lay very still, choking on the stale air that penetrated the thin eye slits of the hood, his stomach throbbing with protest, his lungs afire with the need for oxygen. Slowly, he forced the pain from his chest and regained a normal—if somewhat speeded — breathing pattern. Then he concentrated on appearing dead.

Bullets skipped over the pavement, richocheted from his suit. The ice water shimmered with the rippled wakes of the shells. Finally, the killerbot stopped firing. Jacobs lay still, thankful that the bulk of the suit concealed the rise and fall of the rib cage. Several minutes passed. The killerbot opened up again for thirty seconds, then stopped again. Time crawled by unbearably slow. Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen. Jacobs thought it might be safe now. He licked his lips of the sweat that had trickled down his face, tasted the salty fluid on his tongue. It would take him the best part of a minute to gain his feet, considering the weight of the bullet-proof garments. He would just have to hope that the killerbot would not be watching him, would not see him until he had gained at least ten yards. Sucking in breath, he pushed up with his hands. . . .

He was lucky. Apparently, the killerbot had shifted its attention back to the men at the front barricade. He found his feet, wiggled on weak, shaky legs. That was not good. He would have to will away any weakness until he had reached the comparative safety of the walls ahead. Laboriously, he dragged himself along. He had gone another thirty yards before the killerbot caught the movement and opened with heavy frag slug fire.

The slight downward trend in

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the street had helped him. He rolled, bullets pinging from the pavement on all sides.

Abruptly, the thudding of shells against his fibrous armor ceased. Hands groped for him, pulled off his hood. He blinked his eyes, looked up into Cullen's thin, young face, and smiled. "Thanks."

"I thought you were dead!"

"So did it." he stopped grinning. "What's the situation?"

"I think it's going to be a front-on attack. Any normal killerbot would have exposed itself to our fire by now. It is cunning. And I think it must have some sort of shield."

"They wouldn't waste a shield on a killerbot!" Jacobs said, mentally tabulating the high cost of manufacturing and maintaining a shield projector. They were even too expensive for normal police work.

"Just the same — "

"Well, if we have to initiate a frontal, we might as well start," Jacobs said, taking command of his suit. Cullen sighed audibly with the realization that the hot potato had just changed hands for the last time that night. Anything went wrong after this, Jacobs would carry the blame.

"What first, Phil?"

Jacobs put his eye to one of the tiny lenses, surveyed the wide panorama it gave him. "We can't wheel the shield up to the front door. When we get directly under him, he could just shoot down and pick us off. The door is closed. I suspect it may also be locked. We might all get cut down trying to blow it."

"Now what?"

Jacobs kept his eye to the lens. The illusion of a rain-soaked, empty midway still clung to him. The yellow light gleamed starkly on the black street. For a moment, he thought he could see the carrousel with its garishly painted horses. Perched on the shoulders of the grinning beast was a small, dark-haired boy. Kenny, he whispered. And the illusion shattered, melted back into the light-rimmed puddles. "Call back to the first barricade for a demolition packet. We'll move this barrier along to the side of the building. There is bound to be another doorway. We'll blast our way in and go up and take him."

Cullen looked dubious. But having no plan to offer, he called the barricade officer and requested a demolition packet. Ten minutes later, the suitcase came spinning across the street in their direction. It slid behind the front barrier, right into Cullen's hands.

Jacobs unlatched it, checked out the contents. Everything was there. "Okay," he said, biting his lip for a second as if to convince

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himself that he was in a real situation and not a dream. "Let's start rolling the wall. Over there. Bring it around flush with that corner, then beat it into the alleyway and find a door. We can't waste time. If we do, it may be waiting on the other side of the door when we open it."

When the detonator blew, the door was ripped from its hinges and propelled across the alley, clattering against the opposite wall, bouncing back and forth finally settling to the pavement, like a spinning penny eventually teeters to the top of the game table.

Jacobs led the others into the building, holding his breath through the thick, acrid smoke, careful not to touch the steaming metal of the door frame. Inside, he ordered Officer Talmadge and Officer Cork to carry their flashlamps on half beam. When Cork finally fumbled his lamp on and Talmadge augmented it with his, they found they were indeed in a storage room. Moments later, they found the doorway into the rest of the building. It was locked, but flimsy. There was no need for explosives. Jacobs braced himself against the frame, smashed a foot into it. Twice. Again. Four times. The wood splintered around the hinges. He kicked it again. The door tore free, swung aside..

"Tenth floor," Cullen said.

"My brother-in-law works here," Talmadge said. "I've been here a few times."

"Lead then," Jacobs said.

Holding his lamp up to shoulder level like a trembling child investigating a haunted house, he moved forward, the rest strung out behind him, guns drawn.

"Not the elevator," Jacobs hissed as they threaded their way down a dark hall. "That will tell it where we are."

"The stairs are this way," Talmadge said, turning right into a side corridor and stopping. "Maybe we should put lights at quarter power, Captain."

"Quarter power, then," he snapped.

The light receded. Darkness drifted closer.

Quietly, quietly, they ascended the stairs. They must make no sound now. If this killerbot could reason and act in logical, strategic form, it was a newer, more dangerous killerbot. It would know they had broken in. It would not be blindly firing at an empty street. It would be hunting for them.

He shivered. *It would be hunting for them.*

Although they expected to meet it at every landing, around every corner in the staircase, they climbed the twenty flights without incident. At the tenth floor,

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Talmadge pushed open the double glass doors into the main hallway . . .

. . . and was torn up the middle by fifty or more darts.

He didn't even have time to scream.

Swallowing hard, Jacobs blasted the door, rolled through the gaping hole where the door had been, gun out and firing to the left. Frag slugs whined off the walls, shattered windows at the far end of the corridor. But they didn't bring down the killerbot, for the killerbot had disappeared.

Jacobs was so tense that it seemed his scalp would split open, his skull crack to let out the pressure his whirling mind was accumulating. And he knew that if he was that tense the rest of them were even closer to blowing their tops. They had never had any experience with a killerbot that tried to protect itself. From the first day that Euro had turned killerbots loose on Nortamer, they had been stupid, suicidal units that stood and fired until cut down themselves. Or until their weapons systems ran out of ammunition. They were not detectable, even by X-ray, for what metal they did contain in their flesh was shielded in silicone, plastic, nylon mesh that effectively rendered X-ray useless. They had many advantages as weapons of war, but they didn't have real intelligence. It had always been a matter of standing out of the programmed fire pattern and cutting the human-machine to pieces. This one was different, and this one seemed the turning point of the war.

They had searched all rooms in this wing, their fingers aching with the weight of their guns, their eyes weary with squinting, blurred with trying to sort out the shadows ahead and make them resolve into a human form, something, anything to shoot at. They turned the corner into another corridor, stepping into the killerbot's line of fire. . . .

Officer Cork screamed a gurgling scream, pitched forward, his head prickled with thorns as if he had just fought his way through a garden of live and vicious roses. Officer Drennings did not have a chance to scream; the darts tore out his throat first.

"Fall back!" Jacobs shouted.

He slipped into the safe corridor. If the killerbot tried to come around, he would blast it open in a second. Cullen and Minter were beside him, panting. "God," Minter was saying over and over. Over and over, low and soft and meaninglessly.

It is hunting for us, Jacobs thought.

Their lamps had been smashed by darts. There was only darkness now, thick and all pervading.

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Their eyes were used to the gloom, somewhat, but everywhere there were dense shadows that seemed to move.

The hall was quiet.

To hell with this pessimism! They were three, well-trained police officers. That killerbot, no matter how advanced, was only one. Numerically, they had it cornered. They just had to move with more caution, stop blundering around as if it were a normal killerbot. "Come on," he whispered to Cullen and Minter. "And be careful."

They edged around into the corridor. The two bodies were there, lying in black pools of blood.

But the killerbot was gone.

"We'll never find him," Cullen said. "It will take more men."

Jacobs hushed him, surveyed the corridor. For a moment, he couldn't understand what his eyes were trying to tell him. Then it registered. "No. We have him cornered."

"What — "

"There aren't any stairs or elevators in this corridor," Jacobs said, pointing to the four doors on each side. "Just those eight rooms. He has to be in one of them."

Cautiously, quietly, they moved down the hall, checking the rooms on both sides. Jacobs stood to the side, flung the portal wide, and jerked his arm back as Minter fired a burst of frag slugs into the darkened room. Then, just as cautiously, they would flip on the light and scan it. When Jacobs threw open the fifth door, Minter fired another burst — and was answered with a round that smashed his chest apart.

Two to one. The odds were still in their favor.

Jacobs wished he had not left the suitcase of explosives in the storage room. A ball of contact jelly would be just the thing now. But they didn't have it, so no use wishing. He looked across the doorway to where Cullen waited on the other side, face drawn and white. He pantomimed his intentions, shook off Cullen's gestured disapproval. Gun clutched firm in his right hand, he bent down, leaned to his side, and rolled through the doorway into the darkened room.

Frag shells splintered the doorway behind him.

He had come to rest against a heavy desk, his shoulder stinging with the impact. From the flash of the killerbot's frag pistol, he knew it was on the other side of the desk. Holding his breath so that his panting would not give away his position, he placed the barrel of the pistol against the front of the desk, depressed the trigger and held it down until

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the clip had emptied itself, more than two dozen frag slugs shredding through the desk, ripping out and into the killerbot crouched on the other side.

There were screams.

That didn't fit either. Killerbots never screamed.

Cullen hit the lights.

The room seemed to flare as if the walls had been set afire. There was little left of the desk. The center had been chewed away by the bullets, and both halves had caved inward, the broken top now forming a vee whose point rested on the floor. Carefully, Jacobs got to his feet, his empty pistol clamped in his hand, only a talisman now that its ammunition had been expended. He walked around the desk, kicked away some larger chunks of wood.

The killerbot was approximately forty years old. Black hair. Fair-skinned. And.... And what? Something was wrong, but Jacobs could not decide quite what. He inspected the wounds. A dozen scraps of metal had punctured the corpse. The holes they made welled thick blood. Splinters of wood prickled the body. To one side of the head lay a dartgun.

A dartgun.

He stared at the thing for long, long seconds, unwilling to believe it — to even comprehend it.

"Phil, look at this,'" Cullen said, shoving a frag slug clip and a pistol into Captain's hands.

"'Help me strip him," Jacobs said suddenly, laying the pistol and clip on the floor.

"Huh?"

"Come on."

Jacobs bent to the corpse, hands trembling as he and Cullen peeled away the bloody garments. As he had suspected, the body bore no scars from weapon implantation. There were only the gashes of the frag slugs from Jacobs' own gun — and the wounds of wood splinters from the shattered desk.

"He wasn't a killerbot," Cullen said, his eyes too wide, his mouth hanging too far open.

"He was just a man," Jacobs agreed.

"But why?"

"I — I think maybe I see it. The psych boys may be more detailed — "

"What?" Cullen shifted his weight from one foot to the other, coughed.

Jacobs couldn't take his eyes from the hands of the corpse, the hands that had held the throbbing guns. "We were in war with Euro. A normal war — if any wars are normal. Then Euro command changed the character of armed conflict. They came up with the killerbots. The enemy could be living next door now, waiting. Life took on a fluid, un-

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stable quality." He looked to the hands, could not take his eyes from the trigger fingers.

Cullen coughed.

"Our government played the game too. Nortamer took its criminals, political prisoners, and outcasts, made them into our own killerbots. Both sides admitted that human life was unimportant compared to the robo-factories and towering cities. The inanimate must be preserved while the flesh died. It became a war of attrition. Women and children—"

"Women and children were not spared by either side," Jacobs continued. "The family could dissolve in an instant. We became frustrated with the high degree of instability of society. As we lost our loved ones and were powerless to stop the loss, we were frustrated because there was no one to be angry with. The enemy was amongst us; the enemy *was* us. Sooner or later — psychosis."

"And the man here pretended to be a killerbot because he could shirk his responsibilities and strike back, dump his frustration. But if this catches on — "

Jacobs shuddered. "Exactly."

He stood, left Cullen with the body, and left the Medarts building.

Outside, the rain was still falling, the fog thicker than ever. At the first barricade, he sent the psych boys up to the tenth floor. As he was crawling into his car, Burtrum, Captain of the Westside Sector pulled his car alongside.

"It's over," Jacobs said.

"Strangest thing tonight," Burtrum said, leaning out of the window, his hair plastered to his head. "We brought down two killerbots over near the sports arena, but they — "

"Weren't really killerbots," Jacobs finished.

"How'd you hear?"

"We just had the same thing."

"Gives me the shivers. Wonder what the psych boys will find out?"

Jacobs shrugged, started the car, and pulled out, sweeping in a U-turn and heading down Sycamore Avenue toward the ramp of the autoway. His mind boiled. When frustrations reached an unbearable limit, when family could be dissolved in a hail of bullets at any moment, the human mind rebelled against responsibility. Men took a holiday, indulged in a season for freedom — freedom

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from *everything*, freedom to do *anything*. And now it had begun. He didn't want to think about where and when it might end.

The autoway lay ahead. He punched the key for an extended drive without chosen exit, and took his hands from the wheel. The car moved into the high-speed lane.

Again, the gray rain was peppered with sleet.

Jacobs rolled down the window. He took out his frag slug gun, rested the barrel on the sill. A car came spinning along the black roadway, going the other direction.

He pumped four slugs into it.

The vehicle whined. The auto-drive mechanism had been shattered in its dashboard. The wheels locked. It kicked upward, rolled end over end along the autoway. Fire gushed out of it in crimson and amber waves. The flames on the wet pavement reminded him of a carnival midway on a damp Saturday. He had a glimpse of a carrousel. Painted horses. Ken/child, grinning. . . .

The flames behind died and were gone as the night rushed him headlong.

The carnival vision was blistered away by the onrushing headlamps of another car.

—DEAN R. KOONTZ

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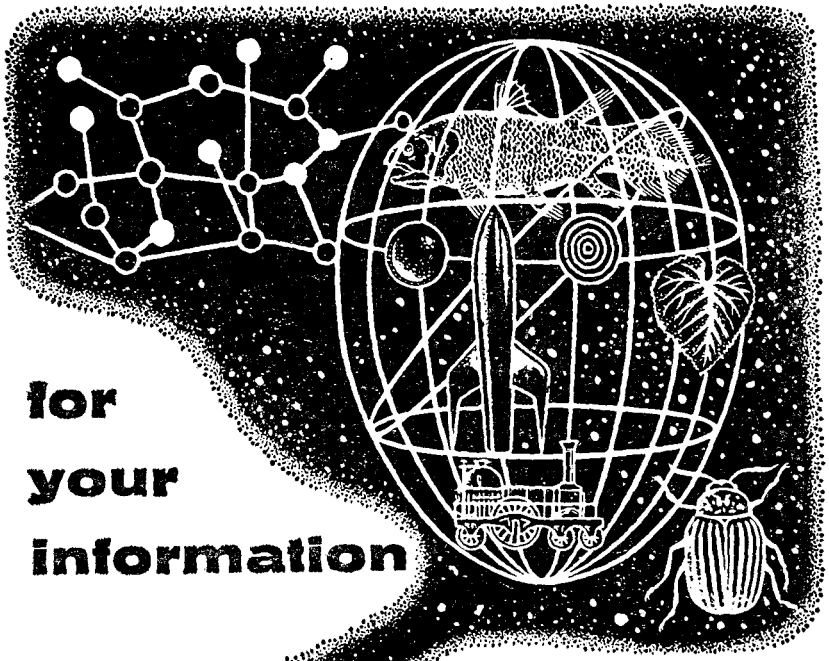

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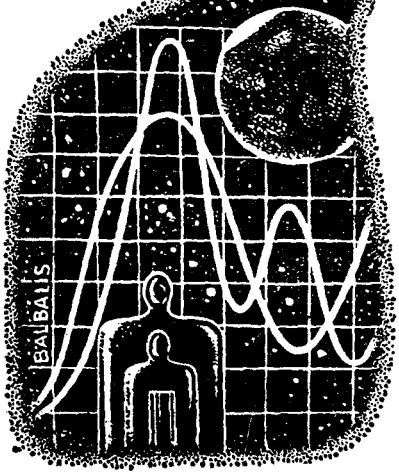

MAX VALIER AND THE ROCKET - PROPELLED AIRPLANE

Precisely forty years ago, in the early summer of 1929, I met Max Valier, the then most popular "rocket man," for the first time. It was not a chance meeting, we had had same casual correspondence for a number of years. But while it was not a chance meeting, it was a hurried

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one because Max Valier was on a lecture tour and had just two hours between trains in Berlin. We met — around ten o'clock in the morning — in a coffee house in the Friedrich Strasse. The building does not exist anymore, but it was near one of the present checkpoints between East and West Berlin.

After greeting me, Valier opened the conversation with the words: "If we have an elevator that rises at a uniform rate, what are the g-forces on the people inside? How would you calculate that?" I could only answer truthfully that I had never given a thought to that problem — and after we had parted I wondered what had prompted that particular question. Now I know, because a biography of Max Valier, just published in West Germany, mentions that he and his friend, the writer Otto Willi Gail, had had many discussions about that point. I suspect that they made it more complicated as the discussion progressed.

Reading that biography naturally made me remember many things I had not thought about for decades and since the book contains much unpublished correspondence it also cleared up a number of points about which I had known little or nothing.

To begin at the beginning, Max Valier was born in Bozen in the province of Tyrol, then a part of Austria, on February 9, 1895. His family had moved there from southwest Germany two generations earlier; they were bakers by profession. And for some reason they began to spell their name with a V instead of the original F. Of course this had the result that it looked like a French name and everybody pronounced it as if it were a French word. Max Valier, in the early years of his fame, still tried to correct people and get them to pronounce it *fah-LEAR* as it had been pronounced originally. But he soon gave up; the written word proved to be more powerful than the spoken word.

At the age of fifteen his whole future career was decided by a chance discussion with his mother's parents. Years earlier a friend of the family had been in financial difficulties, had borrowed some money and had left two small telescopes as security. The money had never been repaid and the two telescopes (one a 1-inch, the other a 1½-inch) had gathered dust. High School pupil Max had just had a few lessons in optics as part of the physics course. He took the telescopes apart, cleaned everything up and built mountings for them. He began observing and was most serious about it; he was especially happy if he succeeded in seeing the satellites of

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Jupiter. Then he bought himself a few astronomical books and, as a sideline, apprenticed himself to a local precision mechanic in order to be able to build instruments himself. He kept an astronomical diary, wrote poems (in German and in Latin) and tried to write a drama.

Then came the first world war.

After basic training Valier managed to be assigned to the meteorological section; it was his private boast that he managed to get through the whole war without ever firing a shot. But some of the meteorological work was done from airplanes and Valier had the ambiton to become an aviator. Circumstances combined against this!; he never acquired a pilot's license even though the newspapers later on spoke of him as "the aviator Valier." He did survive an airplane crash with only a few cracked ribs, but he had not been the pilot.

The fact that he had written a small book on watching the stars for soldiers somehow brought him in touch with the Viennese engineer Hanns Hoerbiger, head of a prosperous engineering firm and inventor of a "new vision of the universe." It was the infamous "glacial cosmogony", in German *Welteislehre*, which thought that it could explain anything and everything by the assumption that roughly half of the universe consisted of ice and the other half of hot matter, like stars. Scientists knew that all this was far too glib and based on unprovable and improbable assumptions, but to the layman it sounded quite convincing. It sounded especially convincing because it "explained" things which scientists admitted they could not, or not yet, explain. Max Valier, always enthusiastic, not only found himself a convert to the new concepts, he decided to become a fighter for the "truth" and organized a long course of lectures at some institution at Vienna. Enthusiasm for a subject and prac-

MAX VALIER
at the age of 32, picture taken in 1927.

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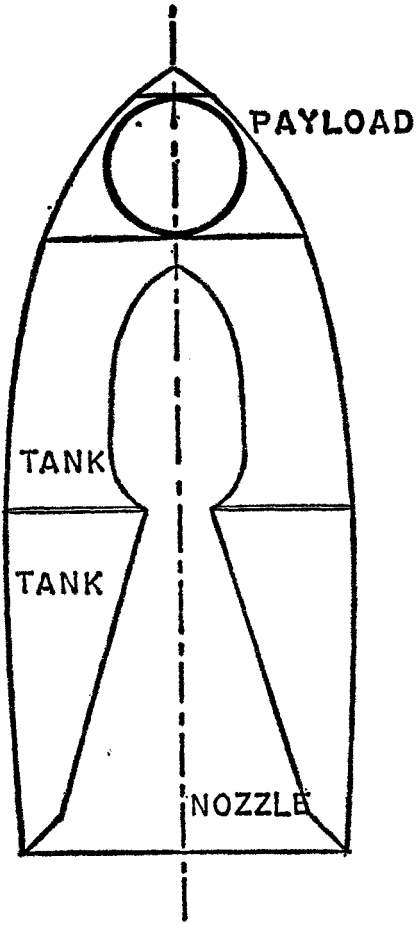

Sketch for the design of a high-altitude rocket made by Max Valier and sent to Prof. Oberth in 1924. The purpose of this design was to have the center of thrust above the center of gravity of the rocket. Re-drawn from Valier's free hand sketch.

tice in talking about it often produces a good orator and that is what Max Valier became.

While busy convincing people that Hanns Hoerbiger and his *Welteislehre* was the proper way to look at nature, he chanced across another book. It was Hermann Oberth's first publication, *The Rocket Into Interplanetary Space*. Valier was enthusiastic about the concept of space rockets too, and soon wrote long letters—minimum: seven pages single-spaced — to Professor Oberth. Oberth answered at equal length; any innovator is happy to find interested pupils. Valier worked on two books simultaneously; one was a popularization of Oberth's book on space rockets which was too heavily mathematical to be read by the public. The other was a large popular astronomy intended to convince everybody about the truth of the *Welteislehre*.

Then there began a tug of war, two innovators fighting for the sole and exclusive allegiance of a promising pupil. Hoerbiger was opposed to space travel; he once wrote me that "the reaction of mere exhaust gases cannot move a vessel in space" and said about Oberth's mathematical proof "calculations can only lead you astray." This would be a strange remark coming from almost anyone; coming from a graduate and professional engineer it was plainly incredible. Since I believed in calculations (and knew far more

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about fossils than Hoerbiger who "explained" them, too) our correspondence was terminated rather abruptly.

Valier also believed in calculations, Oberth's calculations in this case, but he was not hoping for space travel for the sake of space travel, he had another thought in his mind which he revealed in a letter to Oberth, written Febraury 10, 1924, a few months after the publication of Oberth's book:

"I consider it tragic that you build hopes on points which I consider hopeless while you reject what I consider the most important thing. You hope for commercial advantages from the construction of a large space mirror (provided that it can be built at all), you are looking forward to utilizing the metal of iron meteorites on the moon's surface and you hope that we might cool off Venus and make it habitable. All this I cannot believe, but you fail to consider something else which seems to me to be far more important. You are basing everything on astronomical ideas which I believe to be obsolete, for I am one of the advocates of Hoerbiger's Welteislehre . . . Please consider: Hoerbiger claims that the moon is completely covered with ice, that everything we see on the moon, craters, mountains, etc. consists of ice and of ice only. Hoerbiger also says that all the planets, with the sole exception of the earth, are covered with layers of ice, even Mercury and Venus in spite of their proximity to the sun (it can easily be proved mathematically that the sun could not melt ice even on Mercury, provided only that Mercury has no atmosphere). This means that the moon is the crown witness and the touchstone for Hoerbiger's ideas. You will understand what it must mean for Hoerbiger's followers to set foot on the moon. If it turns out that the moon does *not* consist of ice, we are beaten and every thing is lost. But if the surface of the moon is ice then everything has been won and astronomy, astrophysics, meteorology and geology have been proved wrong. This is what prompts me to help you further your invention with everything I can do . . . Moreover there is some urgency. The master of the new knowledge has turned 65 today; it is our dearest desire that the flight to the moon be carried out while he is still alive. . . . "

But the "master" did not think one could get to the moon.

At one time he must have spoken to Valier about this, because a few years ater Valier complained in a letter to me that "the Welteis people are mad at me because I am interested in space travel,

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while others reject me as a rocket expert because I became involved with the Welteislehre."

By the time he wrote this it had became clear to him that scientists would not accept Hoerbiger's idea but that they *might* (with many reservations) consider the possibility of space travel.

It would have been logical to assume that Valier, who had once devoted himself to preaching (there is no other word) Hoerbiger's ideas, would not advocate Oberth's space rockets and spaceships wholeheartedly. That would have been a logical assumption, but by 1929 Oberth and Valier were no longer on speaking terms. This was due to Valier's insistence that "the spaceship should be developed gradually by successive modifications of existing airplanes."

The reason behind this reasoning was the search for money.

Oberth, who by then had devoted fifteen years of his life to rocket theory, had a straight line of development in mind. He also underestimated the cost of this development to a fantastic extent. First one had to create a well-working rocket motors; this would cost about $500. Then one would build sounding rockets capable of carrying scientific instruments to altitudes of about 30 miles. This would cost somewhere between $2000 and $5000. After that had been done, the first spaceship, capable of carrying two people beyond the atmosphere, could be built for about $50,000! So the problem was to find somebody, or an institution, that was able and willing to spend such amounts for the sake of science.

Valier knew that these figures were far too low and tried to find a way to develop rockets in such a manner that their very development would produce an income. At the time the most modern passenger airplane, with a cruising speed of about 110 miles per hour, was the G-23 developed by Professor Huge Junkers. Junkers had been the first to build airplanes of metal exclusively — no canvas, no bamboo, no wooden window frames. Everything was supposed to be of metal. "Even the seat cushions?" a newspaperman is supposed to have asked after the lecture preceding the demonstrations. Junkers smiled and said that cushions were cushions and that his window curtains also were still curtains, though he intended to have them made of fiberglass.

Now the G-23 had three engines, one in the fuselage and one in each wing. Valier suggested replacement of the two wing engines, by rocket motors for a fast take-off; the cruising could then be done with the propeller of the

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center engine once cruising altitude had been reached. Oberth pointed out that the efficiency of a rocket would be very poor unless the airplane moved at a speed close to the velocity of the exhaust of the rocket. Valier replied that low efficiency did not matter if one could do something in that manner that could not be done at all otherwise. Oberth replied that a fast-flying airplane would have to have thin wings; Valier answered that just the thick wings of the Junkers airplanes were useful because one could put the fuel tanks inside the wings. Oberth countered by saying that even yard-thick wings would not be voluminous enough to hold the fuel the rockets would swallow in a few minutes of operation.

Oberth had naturally figured it out carefully.

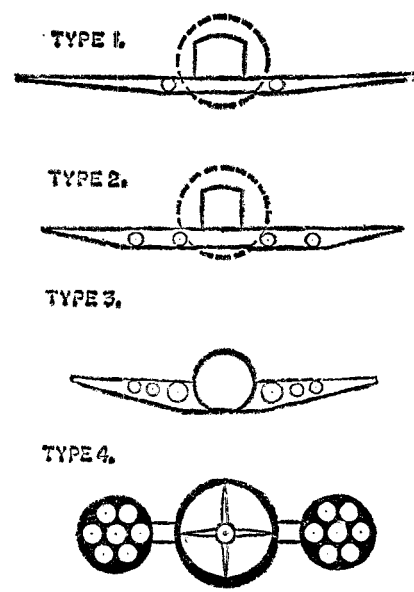
But Valier continued to develop his line of reasoning. The next type would have one additional rocket motor in each wing; because it would fly faster, the wings could be shorter. The one after that would have three rocket motors in each wing, no longer use a propeller, and would need a pressurized cabin because it would cruise at about 30,000 feet with speeds ranging from 35 to 600 miles per hour. After that there would be a wingless type: the spaceship.

To modern readers a few of these figures sound familiar; passenger jets cruise at 30,000 feet with a cruising speed of around 600 miles per hours. But they have thin wings and their engines of course, are jet engines, not rocket engines.

Now, after three decades after Valier's death it turns out that he did not always mean "rocket"

★——————————★

Valier's "intermediate types" in his scheme to transform an airplane into a spaceship. Type 1 still has a propeller and two "rockets"; Type 2 is the same with two more "rockets" added. Type 3 dispenses with the propeller and type 4 is the spaceship, all seen from the back, with tail assembly and landing gear omitted.



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when he said so. The "intermediate types" he proposed were to be propelled by an engine that used a liquid rocket fuel but took the necessary oxygen from the atmosphere. This, by definition, is a jet engine, though one must not think of modern jet engines when hearing the word. Valier's scheme, expressed in a letter to Professor Oberth, with carbon copies to the head of the Austrian Society for High Altitude Research, Dr. Franz von Hoefft in Vienna, and to Dr. Walter Hohmann in Essen, ran as follows: In a piston engine we have the cycle that begins with the intake of air and fuel vapor, followed by compression and ignition. At the moment of explosion Valier wanted to have an exhaust valve jumping open so that the explosion gases would not spend their energy moving pistons, connecting rods etc., but produce reaction directly. Valier never had an opportunity to try the development of such an engine — and I have grave doubts whether it could have been done — but the fundamental idea of a jet engine is plainly present.

This, of course, invalidated the calculations of the large amounts of rocket fuel and liquid oxygen that were cited by Oberth (and by me, too) against Valier's intermediate types. I did not know about the idea of a piston engine modified for reaction, and Oberth, von Hoefft and Hohman seem to have forgotten about it almost immediately. To a large extent it was Valier's fault; he should have said "rocket" when he meant a rocket and invented another term for his airbreathing engine. I suspect that "rocket" almost immediately. To a large extent it was Valier's fault; he did not want to put ideas into other people's heads; during his lectures and in his publications he used the word rocket exclusively.

Of course there were discussions with engineers of the Junkers Aircraft Company which took much energy and time and brought no fruit. Apparently the engineers felt that this was something for the future and that their next job was simply a bigger or faster airplane with conventional engine. Professor Junkers also had his pet ideas;; he wanted to introduce Diesel engines for aircraft. Still, a few years after these discussions, Junkers equipped two of his smaller one-engine aircraft with batteries of solid fuel rockets to see whether rockets could be used as take-off help. The experiment was a success, but it was not followed up for about a decade — Professor Junkers died in the meantime.

What followed then is the period in his life which most people remember when Valier's name is mentioned. It was the period of r o c ke t-propelled automobiles,

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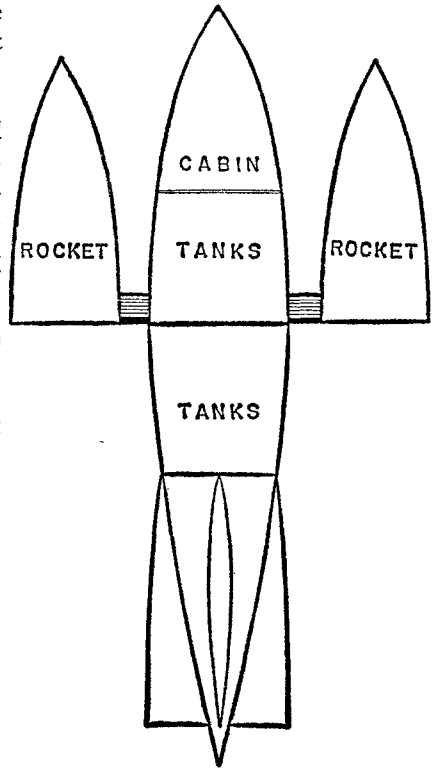
rocket-propelled railroad cars, rocket-propelled sleds and a few attempts at rocket-propelled gliders. They made Valier's name a household word, at least in Europe. They attracted a great deal of attention but they did not really accomplish anything in the field of engineering. Valier, whose main aim was to attract attention to rocket propulsion in general, also claimed that they contributed to the improvement of solid fuel rockets. But since no new types of solid rocket fuels were tried, the experiments did not even do that.

Some time during this period one of the directors of the Society for Space Travel (I don't recall his name, but he was an important official in the German Postal Service) remarked: "If Valier could only keep his mouth shut!" The occasion was Valier's collaboration with Gottlob Espenlaub, one of the German glider pioneers. Espenlaub, the first man to have gliders towed in flight by airplanes, had promised to build an airplane for rocket propulsion. The design was quite modern, sweptwing with a faint dihedral. Valier announced that he would use this airplane to fly the English Channel, from Dover to Calais, following the route of Louis Blériot's historic flight.

Then Espenlaub did not build this airplane, but constructed a tailless glider which he flew himself, using solid fuel rockets. The glider caught fire in midair and Espenlaub had to jump — without a parachute. He survived his jump, but suffered a severe brain concussion.

★————————————————★

Valier's Type 4, seen from the side. This was to be the first version of the spaceship, later version were to look more like the big rockets of today.



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Finally, in December, 1929, Valier found support from Dr. Paul Heylandt, the owner of a plant making liquid gases. Valier built a simple (uncooled) rocket motor of steel, weighing 9 pounds In January 1930 he recorded the result of test stand burnings:

		Measured Recoil	
		kg.	lbs.
January	27	3.0	6.6
	28	8.5	18.7
	29	13.0	28.6
	30	21.5	47.3
February	11	34.0	75.0

(The interruption was due to a lecture tour.)

Six such rocket motors, Valier reasoned, would produce enough thrust to propel him across the English Channel. But first it was put into an automobile frame again. It worked — not well, but good enough for a demonstration. Witnesses of one demonstration were engineers of the Shell Oil Corporation. They reported to the home office and the home office decided to support Valier's development work. But there was one condition: the fuel must not be alcohol or somebody's gasoline, it had to be Shell oil. Nobody can tell whether Valier had any private doubts, he accepted the condition. He did feel hurried by competition.

Henri F. Mélot in France was said to work on rocket-propelled airplanes for the French army it was not true. A man by the name of Robert W. E. Lademann who claimed to have Robert H. Goddard's confidence, told that Goddard was supported lavishly by the U.S. Army and that his rockets had reached altitudes of 60 miles; this was even less true. A newspaperman by the name of Erich Boyer published an article about Friedrich Wilhelm Sander who had furnished the rockets for Opel's experiments with racing cars and railway cars. Boyer claimed that Sander had built a liquid fuel rocket motor that had run for 48 minutes. To this day nobody is quite sure whether Sander was working in this field or whether Boyer, who never was very reliable, invented the story. That the Society for Space Travel was about to continue experiments started by Oberth was correct, but the financial situation of the society was such that Valier did not need to rush. Rumors about rocket experimentation in the Soviet Union were correct too, as is now known, but the Russians also took their time.

In order to use Shell oil, Valier had to make modification. He added an "emulsion chamber" to his rocket because he intended to run it on a mixture of fuel and water. It worked a few times, but on May 17, 1930—a Saturday—

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the rocket motor exploded. Valier, who had been standing next to it without any protection, collapsed. Ten minutes later he was dead. A splinter had severed one of the major arteries in his chest and he died of an internal hemorrhage. The time was about 15 minutes later 9 PM.

His body was cremated in Berlin on May 23, 1930. Professor Oberth and I were both present. The ashes were then flown to Munich for burial. The City of Munich should erect a monument to him. He was not always right, but he was quite often too impetuous, but he was always idealistic and energetic. And he sincerely believed in the Ships of Space that were to come.

—WILLY LEY

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FORECAST

Six or seven years ago Frank Herbert, until then best known as the author of the classic underwater sf story known variously as *Under Pressure* or *21st Century Sub* (depending on which edition you read), began publication of the stories which ultimately wound up in the fat science-fiction novel, *Dune*. One of the biggest sf books ever published, *Dune* was also one of the most successful in carrying away awards. It won the 1965 Nebula award from the Science Fiction Writers of America, and the 1965 Hugo from the World Science Fiction Convention, and if it didn't win any others it is probably only because there were no others in its category to win.

Next month *Galaxy* begins publication of the final story in the *Dune* cycle. It is called *Dune Messiah*. Complex, evocative, brilliant, it is all that *Dune* was, and maybe a little more . . .

James Blish is with us next month, too, with a longish and very fine novelette called *The City That Was the World*. Suppose you were you — that is, someone with a burning curiosity about space and the future — but blessed with the wealth and independence of a Howard Hughes, the intelligence and technological grasp of an Einstein and an Edison combined. Suppose that you had it within your power to look into the future, and change it as you would — but almost surely had to die as a result. That's the problem. What Blish's hero does about it is the solution.

We've also got a new A. Bertram Chandler novelette scheduled, a fascinating study of the Russian proto-spaceman, Tsiolkovsky, by someone who knew him, the usual Budrys and Ley enjoyable columns — and more. See you then!

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A MAN SPEKITH

by RICHARD WILSON

Illustrated by PEÑUÑURI

This is Esoteric Ed, spinning you another platter on the Earth label, entitled The Last Man. It's a little cracked, but it's crazy — real crazy!

I

Marty: Don't read this; it's in Old English and the spelling is different: "Jangling is when a man spekith to moch beforn folk, and clappith as a mille, and taketh no keep what he saith."

Now that you've read it anyway, you bright ones, I'll tell you that Geoffrey Chaucer wrote it in "The Parson's Tale." What he said was — but I needn't translate; you probably had no more trouble with it than if you'd been listening to the kind of English

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disk jockeys once spoke on rock radio stations.

This is a story of a Jangler nearly seven hundred years removed from Geoffrey's time. It's the tale of a disk jockey named Jabber McAbber, which he sometimes called himself. At other times, at other contemporary music stations, as *they* called *themselves*, he was known as Esoteric Ed, or Happy Mac, or James the First. For he moved on. He moved from Cincinnati to Akron to Chicago to Phoenix. He dreamed of making the big time in New York but that call never came.

Another kind of call came, though. It came in Phoenix, where he took the fancy of an eccentric billionaire who owned, among things and people, a radio-television network, an advertising agency, a movie studio, a publishing house, a university, several electronics companies, a city of some size in the Southwest — he owned most of the real estate and enough of the politicians, one way or another — and a deactivated rocket base in the desert. You know the name of the billionaire and the singleminded determination with which he went after anything he wanted. More about him later.

Our disk jockey's real name was Edward James McHenry. He was 38 years old now and sometimes he had to force it. The old spontaneity wasn't always there. The drive had ebbed. The zing had zung.

Once the words had tumbled out, more of them than he could articulate, but now it took an effort to make them flow. His delivery was more deliberate, not rehearsed, but thought out.

It comforted him to know his plight was not unique. A writer had told him of times when it took a monumental effort to roll a sheet of paper into the typewriter. He'd known artists who'd said similar. He'd known poets, too, and peasants . . .

"Oh, yes! I've known poets and peasants, and pallbearers and priests. And princes crossed my path, or I theirs, in foreign climes and on native shores, for princes travel. And I've known princesses — native born like Grace K. Rainier and Rita H. Kahn — and those of alien corn like Elizabeth and Margaret, not to mention whatsername and whoozis.

"But I've strayed from my theme, which is music, so I'll get off and spin a record, as we used to say before tape. Spin with me, won't you?, as we enjoy the sounds of the Jefferson Airplane."

Two minutes and forty seconds later he was on again. He'd prepared for the end of the music. In the old days it would have been off the cuff, off the top of the head, off the world.

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"Wasn't that the most? Where can you go from there, except elsewhere? And so we spin you on, you spinnable people, to the obligatory scene, if you remember Drama 201 — we spin you, I say, to this word from our sponsor — this important announcement:

"Friends! Fellow human beings! Mortals like me! Are you troubled with irregularity? . . . "

He went on too long, unnecessarily identifying, stretching it out.

You may have wondered who's been talking here, besides Ed. I mean words don't come out of a void, especially when they're not Ed's words and Ed's the last man alive.

I've been talking. Me, Marty. I'm a machine. That's what the first letter of my acronym stands for. My full name is Machine Amplifying Rationalizations Treating of Yore. Or maybe it's Machine Assessing Reality as Told to You. It doesn't matter. The acronym-makers are long gone. I realize that as a machine I should be positive. I shouldn't tell you different things, or variations of the same thing, and claim there's no real difference. To do this is to be guilty of what somebody called terminological inexactitude. I think the somebody was Winston Churchill. Of course I don't really mean I really *think*. That would be a lie and it would not do to have a machine capable of lying. Especially since one of my functions is to amend, correct, edit, amplify and otherwise make more meaningful for posterity the mouthings of Esoteric Ed. But first let's listen some more to Ed.

Ed:

Sometimes I tell different stories, up here in the lonely. I make up alternate pasts for myself. I use different names for my different pasts, for my different moods.

Some days I'm Gaylord Guignol, sole survivor of a destroyed world and devil-may-care chronicler of its last agony. Except that I do care; my nonchalance disguises the deep hurt I felt, and feel, at the death of Earth.

Sometimes I'm Hank Hardcastle, steely-eyed hero of a thousand thrilling adventures, scion of a near-noble family.

Other times I'm Harry Protagonist, space disk jockey, who's been set whirling in the void on an unfathomable mission. I need to communicate my fears, hopes, fantasies and, above all, my puzzlement, to my imagined listeners.

Sometimes I forget who I really am. A person can tamper just so long with what he is, pretending to be another, before he becomes, to some extent, one of those other selves. Then his own self is lost, or blurred. Too much

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blurring is bad. It's desirable sometimes to hide from one's self, to pretend, to merge the ego into a fantasy personality, to live or dream vicariously, but I may be overdoing it.

Who am I really? Does it matter as long as I get through the day? I owe myself and you my listeners that much. It is my duty to you and to myself. But a certain tranquility is needed to reach the end of the day. Some achieved this by natural talent, by their very vivaciousness or stick-to-it-iveness. Doggedly they breathed in and out and took sustenance from time to time and went to the bathroom to rid themselves of the residue of previous sustenance-takings, and did a little work, and lo, it was a new day. Some never achieved the new day. They funked it. They flunked out. Others got there, though, by drink or drugs or pot. I speak of back then, you understand, before the now. You may have noticed that I'm not always lucid, though once in a night club I was Larry Lucid, explainer of contemporary society to those less informed. But I coped. I used music. I always had something on, either on the hi-fi or the radio. I used to bounce through the day on a big beat that included me in because it just naturally assumed that everybody was a part of it and approved and throbbed along with it and so I was one with all that went on. But that was long ago and now I'm part of nothing because nothing is going on.

The only thing that goes on is what I make happen and even that may not be real.

They've done something to me. I feel banded, like a Canadian duck. I don't have a circlet around wrist or ankle but I know something's got me somewhere. Maybe I've been implanted — I've already been tapped and bugged.

I read once that some ornithologists had attached a radio to a condor to find out how far it went for food, or to rest, or whatever condors do to get by.

I didn't find out whether the condor knew it'd been bugged. But I know something's been done to me and I resent it. I don't mind doing my bit for science; but if they've tampered with my human dignity, if they've psyched me in the psyche . . .

Marty:

This is Marty again. I'll tell you more about the man who put our hero up here. His name was John Potter Parnell and, because he was a sanitary facilities manufacturer, he was known as Potty, or John. Sometimes he was called Young Potty, to distinguish him from his father,

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also known as Potty and to a few intimates as Poopy. Young Potty, at 50, was still in his father's shadow.

The old man had founded the business and made the original millions. Hy-G-Enic, Inc., manufactured most of the country's and later the world's toilets, urinals, sinks, towel racks and dispensers of sanitary and prophylactic devices. The millions and then the billions poured in at such a rate that, when Poopy retired, Potty could have sat back and let inertia provide opulently for him and all his heirs. But Potty — he really preferred John — had come late to the presidency and wasn't content to let Hy-G-Enic expand at a safe, sure rate. He established a foundation that awarded grants for research. He set up an experimental division, hired scientists and turned them loose to work at their own pace and let him know when they'd got something. He sponsored a competition to design a better bidet. He sent engineers to Washington to see what Hy-G-Enic could do in the space program.

It was Potty's emissaries to NASA who led to the hiring of Ed. They got him from a subsidiary company, Arizona Airtalk, for which he'd been broadcasting as Jim McHenry, Jock of the Desert. The Jock's music-talk show was the despair of competitors in the rock radio game.

We'll come back to Ed. Here's some information about me — Marty the machine. It's not as if I'm *a* machine, singular. I'm the end product of many machines, sophisticated and otherwise. I know everything they know because I'm the synthesis, the reincarnation of all of them.

Let me answer your other unspoken question, whoever you are: Why don't I *sound* like a machine? How come I come on colloquial instead of respectfully, as befits the man-machine relationship? Like: "You master, me robot." Or solemnly, like: "The data you have requisitioned are stored in circuits in Subtank 4739C of my vast interconnected memory banks. There will be an unavoidable delay while the necessary hookups are made to retrieve this rarely-requested material."

Nuts. Everything I have is yours — whoever, wherever and whenever you are — instantly. Sometimes you don't even have to ask. This whole ship is my memory circuit. I extend into every nook — even to places Ed prefers not to think about, like the reconstitution unit. You might almost say I *am* the ship, but that would be an exaggeration, and immodest.

If you still think I sound more human than mechanical, it's only

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natural. Hell, I was made by human beings. How else should I talk? Like Mowgli's wolves or Tarzan's apes? Machines talk good. Like colloquial. Machines have been talking for generations. Ask Victor.

Ed:

I have this reluctance to eat that keeps me thin. I mean I'm not bloaty. Old tum don't sag. Old chin ain't double. No dewlaps yet on old cheekflesh. I'm a pretty good specimen by any standards and I guess it's because I'm abstemious. I don't eat much — certainly not between meals. You wouldn't either if everything you had for dinner was something you'd had a hundred, a thousand times befor dinner was something you'd had a hundred, a thousand times before. It's reconstituted stuff. I mean I've bought used cars and second-hand boats and if I'd settled down I might have even have bought a used Oriental rug, but I'd have drawn the line at used food. My folks talked sometimes about the Depression and told about the cheap things they ate, but at least they'd been the first to eat them. They came out of those bad times strong and proud. I sit down to dinner with as much pleasure as an explorer at a cannibal feast. I don't want to eat this stuff, sanitary as it must be, that has already passed at least once through the alimentary canal. And there's no comfort in knowing it's no foreign waterway that's been navigated — it's my own, my native gland. It's an affront to the system. Except it's not the system that's outraged. The body can take it; it's the imagination that revolts. It's got this way of exaggerating to the point where you say never mind what the facts are, things ought to be different.

Marty:

I have to defend the reconstitution works against Ed's slander. After all, it's a fellow machine. What comes out of it goes back into Ed perfectly clean. It's cleaner than what he got in those fancy restaurants he enjoyed and a damn sight more sanitary *and* nutritious than the weird meals he cooked for himself in his various bachelor apartments.

Excuse the digression. I had to get it out of my system, as Ed was getting it out of his. If these notes are published, by some future chronicler, some poor M.A. desperate for a new subject for his doctoral dissertation, they could be titled just that — "Getting It Out of His System." Ed's trouble is that whatever he gets out goes back in. His only irreversible catharsis is verbal. Or do I mean oral?

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What I'm trying to do is write a story with no cooperation from my subject. I'm not a trained writer but I appreciate the difficulties. Of course I'm not writing in the strict sense. No hands, you know. So I do what he does — talk — and the words are put down, for posterity? Or put up, as preserves are? It's a kind of automatic writing, without slates; certainly without sleight of hand. If I write, or talk, too much, put it down, or up, to my inexperience. First one writes, then he edits. I couldn't really be expected to know very much, consisting as I do mostly of a bunch of circuits in and near the hull of this experimental capsule of Potty Parnell's. My job is to store away — preserve — Ed's meandering mind, or as much of it as he reveals through his on-mike monologues, plus as much more as can be vouchsafed by a machine. They had to trust to a machine because nobody else was going up here with Ed. And nobody did.

My knowledge of Ed was gathered piece by piece as people fed into my predecessor machines information provided by interviews with hundreds of people who'd known Ed and talked about him before Potty gave him his job. There is also the information provided by Ed himself, both in direct interviews and during some electronic gastro-intestnial spying. It began at Ed's first luncheon date with Potty, when Ed swallowed a miniaturized transmitter imbedded in a raw oyster; and it lasted until it had passed through Ed's system. It wasn't as messy as it might seem. Ed was Potty's week-long house guest and all the bathrooms were part of Hy-G-Enics experimental system. Waste products were processed all the time and it was mere routine to retrieve the device which had lately left Ed.

II

Ed:

It's not fair. Other castaways had their pals along, or found them. Crusoe had Friday, and I wonder how they *really* got through their long weekends. The Swiss Family Robinson had each other. The lonely shepherd had his dog, not to mention favored members of his flock. I mean everybody had somebody, like Holmes had Watson and Nixon had Agnew and Bergen had McCarthy.

But here I am without a soul. No Sancho Panza, no Tonto, no stooge or straight man—not even a robot.

Considering who they are, they might at least have provided me with a faithful dog Flush.

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Marty:

This is really not bad. I didn't think our untutored subject had it in him to make that double-barreled allusion to Potty Parnell's business and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog.

There are times when I have more than a grudging admiration for Harry Protagonist or James the First, or whoever he thinks he is.

He's also full of little sexual references, which is not surprising considering the state of his deprivation. That business of Crusoe's Friday and the shepherd's favorite. It's a wonder Ed hasn't long since burst from his cell with a hell of a yell — and what? Having burst, whither would he wander?

I'm only a machine, it's true, but compared to him I'm lucky. Being partly electrical, I have planty of outlets. He has few, other than his mouth, his mike and his music. I, with no needs, have him. He, with all human needs concentrated in him, does not know I exist.

This is sadness. I can't feel it, of course, but I know it intellectually.

I should tell you how the doom came. Some astrologer predicted it and a lot of people, Ed included laughed. She said she did not want to alarm anybody unnecessarily but a crack would develop along the spine of the world and Earth would split apart like a cantaloupe. There'd be no saving anybody.

It happened more or less that way. If you pushed button D, I'd spout the whole story, reconstructed from Earth broadcasts sent as the Earth holocaust was in progress. Ed heard them. He drank a lot as he listened. He cried and cursed. But he was happy that he'd been spared. Relatively happy. He still drinks a lot.

Potty had fitted out the satellite for his own eventual use as a holiday space yacht and had built in a few hidden luxuries. One was a dummy ballast tank holding a thousand gallons of Bourbon. Hy-G-Enic's chief chemist, who was from an old Kentucky mountain family, had distilled it for Potty's personal use. The Bourbon is decanted into a disguised tap. Ed found it accidentally one night. He's made good use of it since.

Ed:

I wish I had somebody to listen to. Somebody as exciting, as witty, as *alive* as I am.

I could play back my own tapes, of course, but there'd be no novelty in that. I know what I've said. It's more exciting now to wonder what I'll say next. I constantly surprise myself. The damnedest things come out, so

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excellently said, so apt, that I'd be a fool to waste my time with replays.

I'm the distillation of all I know — of all everyone's known. I'm the end product of an entire culture. Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, Milton Berle, A. A. Berle — all that anyone's done lives on only in me. Ain't that a laugh? They used to laugh at me for my literary pretensions, for being a dilettante, for skimming and reading digests or excerpts, for skipping the dull parts and savoring the best of the best, and now here I am alone, the sole repository, the poor schlocky vessel, the greatest by default. Pretty keen, hey boy? Hey Lionel Trilling, hey Norman Podhoretz, hey Professor Twit of English Lit, how do you like them apples?

Pretty sour, what? Sourer by the hour.

Of all the people in the world who might have represented it, don't it just frost you that the residue happens to be little old yours truly, with an IQ about two points higher than plant life? Like it or not, I'm what's left. Ready or not, here I come, hell-bent for eternity. Look me over, posterity. Read me and weep. You were expecting maybe some knowledgeable interpreter of the current scene? Some fact-packed fellow who could tell you true, like one of those copyreaders on the *New York Times*? No such luck, buddy. You got me, is what you got.

If they'd had any sense they'd have packed this tomb the way the Egyptians did, with all the paraphernalia a body might need on the other side. They'd have supplemented me with the things they used to put in time capsules — the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the World Almanac and microfilms of the *New York Times*. They'd have ballasted me with bound volumes of the *New Yorker* and *Harper's* and the *Atlantic*. Had they but known, they could have dispensed with me entirely and packed in a few hundred pounds of reproductions of Art Treasures of the Louvre and tapes of the Philharmonic and high-brow stuff like that. Instead they got, and you're stuck with, old excess baggage himself — me.

Depressing, isn't it? But maybe I'm the only monument Earth deserves. Mediocre Max, the modern marvel. Second-Rate Stu, Nat the Nebbish, the Lowest Common Denominator.

You know what's here in the way of a tomb for mankind? Aside from my life-support system and inexhaustible supplies of food and air? Me and my microphone and my records. No books — no microfilms.

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They used to ask what books you'd take to a desert island. The answer was the Bible, Shakespeare and an unabridged dictionary. Well, I haven't even got a comic book or the *Reader's Digest*. I haven't got a World Almanac or a Sears catalog or a phone book.

Everything that was ever written down on Earth exists only in my head, in my poor thick skull, imperfectly remembered if at all. And there's damn little I can remember even when I put my mind to it. I tried to reconstruct some of the good stuff but it came out the way it did for the Duke in *Huckleberry Finn* doing to be or not to be. I think I remember how Mark Twain started it. "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, but that ain't no matter."

I recall snatches like that. I put them down when I think of them. I write them in a notebook — *the* notebook — 260 pages, counting both sides of the paper. There's nothing else to write on. Nothing.

So I'm selective in what I put down. I don't write junky stuff that springs to mind, things that got into my head in grade school and never got out, like: go home, your mother's got buns, or Mary, Mary, will you get up, we need the sheets for the table.

I talk that into the mike, to you great unseen audience out there in Radioland — you posterity types who might pick it up one day and have the patience to sort me out for what I'm worth as a footnote to a vanished civilization.

What I try to preserve on my precious few pages is what's maybe worth remembering exactly, like the Twenty-third Psalm or the Preamble to the Constitution. I go over it in my mind and sometimes I say it into the mike till I'm sure I've got it right. Then I put it down.

It's a mixed-up bag, that book. It's got the aforementioned Shakespeare — funny what you remember, like post with haste to incestuous sheets, or when the wind's north northeast I can tell a hawk from a handsaw, but like the Duke I can't get past the first few lines of to be or not to be. What a crying shame they had to pick me for the sole survivor — as if anybody did any picking. As if there were a They.

Another thing I put down was a line from Ethics One at college, and don't ask me who wrote it. It goes: "Everything is what it is and not another thing." I also put down what Popeye said. Not Faulkner's Popeye; the one I remember is Segar's, in the comic strip: "I yam what I yam." May-

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be it's just as good. How about: "Do your thing?" Is that less worthy of preservation because it welled up out of the folk talk of the sixties instead of from the pen of a Jeremy Bentham or a John Stuart Mill or whoever I read for Ethics One? Some words lived because they were in all the libraries. There are no libraries now. There's only me, and if I remember "I yam what I yam" and "Do your thing," who's to question their validity? You've got to take what I give you because I'm all there is.

I also remember "*Cogito ergo sum,*" though I'm essentially a lowbrow. I even know what it means, not being entirely stupid. But what the hell, as archie said to mehitabel, what the hell. There's no Descartes now, let alone des horse, and it hardly matters which goes before the other. The point is that the highbrows, from the year one, are at the mercy of a lowbrow me, namely Jabber McAbber.

It doesn't entirely appall me. There could be just cracked Earth and no survivors.

So hey out there — here I am, the average man, for better or worse. It's no good wishing you had a Schlesinger or a Toynbee or a Churchill. I yam what I yam and you damn well have to make the best of it.

Another thing I put down in the notebook was the Jabberwocky; I don't want them to think we didn't appreciate the ridiculous. I also remember a line from Stephen Leacock — "He rode off in all directions" — and some bits from Marx Brothers pictures. They're written down, too, to balance other stuff like "A rosered city half as old as time" and a few things that Lincoln said.

Somebody told me once I had an eclectic mind and I had to look it up. Somebody else told me I had a vast store of superficial knowledge — that I was a wellspring of trivia. So be it. If that's what millennia of civilization have labored to produce — if I'm it — that's tough, buddy. I'm what's left. I'm the end product, the final solution, the distillation, the residue. The dregs, if you like. Maybe it's poignant or maybe it's just ironic, but I'm what everything led up to. I'm the gift horse, so don't worry too much about whether my teeth could have been firmer or whiter. Just be glad there's a tongue to click against them, to make sounds you may transcribe one day.

I'm human, at least. You might even find me alive, whoever you are, and examine the old body to determine how we locomoted and reproduced and communicated and all like that.

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It'd be nice if there were two of us. You'd get a better picture. I don't dwell on such thoughts. It does no good to consider what might have been. It's better for you this way. I talk more. Maybe I wouldn't talk at all if I had a woman to share my survivorship. Or write enduring things in my finite journal. I'd be too busy figuring out whether the life-support system would support three or more and how long it would be before we had a population-explosion problem.

So probably it's a good thing there's just me, all by myself alone with my imperfect memory but with my loquacious larynx to provide you with anthropological data and enough cultural phenomena for some of your graduate students to earn their Ph.D.'s.

I may be no more than an appendix in one of your scholarly journals. It's probably good to see myself in perspective, but I do feel hurt on behalf of all the great minds who preceded me.

I console myself with the thought that you're all figments of my imagination. I'm the only one who exists, as far as I know. This truly may be the end of us all.

In which case I should get off and play a record. I'll reach into my bin of nostalgia and spin an oldie from the days of yore which I trust all you figments out there will enjoy as we listen to Ted Fio Rito and his Hotel Taft Orchestra playing for our lonely delectation. How about a little number entitled Who Will Be With You When You're Old and Gray?

How many question marks go in there?

Who indeed?

I will, maybe.

Marty:

Our subject raises a question here. To begin at the end, the song he referred to is not Who Will Be With You When You're Old and Gray? It's Who Will Be With You When You're Far Away?

The other questions are academic. His is a non-linear medium, so it doesn't matter whether there's one question mark or two. But the fact that he has the wit to raise the question makes it clear that the passenger who denigrates himself as excess baggage has more supercargo than he realizes. There's no need for the *Times* morgue — a euphemism among newspapermen for classified and cross-referenced files of information — or the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and those other things when he's got them and more in the form of yours very truly Marty — namely me. Anything they can do I can do better

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because I'm automated. I've got instant and total recall. It was not for nothing that Potty Parnell spent a month's receipts in hiring the massed brains of Parnell University — he realized too late what the initials sounded like — to encode the world's knowledge into me, your friend Marty — repository of all that's worth saving — Super Time Capsule — Purveyor to Posterity — Eternity's End. Man.

III

Ed:

I'm a hell of a guy to be up here as the epitome of civilization. If anybody'd asked me to name the world's ten best books I'd have had a fit. If he'd asked about the week's top 40, though, I'd have rattled them right off, along with the names of the recording artists.

I knew a guy once who collected Beethoven Sevenths. I mean he liked Symphony Number 7 and he had a lot of versions by different conductors like Toscanini, Klemperer, Bernstein and Von Karajan. I understand that. When I was a boy I collected different bands doing St. Louis Blues. Then when I got to be a widely-heard disk jockey I had to bone up on the rock groups. I did it out of duty, at first. But familiarity breeds content, as they say, and after a while I appreciated what they were trying to do and I spoke up for them and knew them as well as if I were their Boswell, their Baedeker, their brother. I was loyal to the Beatles before they were fashionable. After the Beatles it was possible to listen to others in a long line: the Mothers of Invention, the Fugs, the Mamas and the Papas, Country Joe and the Fish, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Mogen David and the Grapes of Wrath, the Electric Flag, the Nitty-Gritty Dirt Band, the Quicksilver Messenger Service, the Velvet Underground, the Who, the 1910 Fruitgum Co. I tell you it's a far cry from the Boswell Sisters and the Weavers and the Yacht Club Boys.

Conrad. Sure I know there was an English novelist by that name and that he was a Pole originally but I really know more about the Conrad in *Bye Bye Birdie*. I've got the album here. The other Conrad wrote *Lord Jim* and I saw the movie but don't ask me what it's about except that O'Toole was in it. I saw it in a drive-in in a rainstorm and it was all very dim. The six-pack I had with me didn't clarify anything. Let's listen to Conrad Birdie. He is more my speed. He drank beer, too. A slob.

I barely remember who wrote *Tom Jones* or *Jane Eyre* but cer-

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tain titles and authors from my high school days are engraved on my memory. They wouldn't bear repeating except that that's all they're doing to me — repeating, repeating, as if to pound it home that these are samples of what my education has left me with — Volume One: The Open Kimono by Seymour Hair. Like that.

Enough of the liberal arts. Other things I remember are palindromes, graffiti and gems from long-gone comics and radio serials and the back pages of the women's magazines, such as Nov Schmoz Ka Pop; Tortured 9 Years by 2 CORNS and a WART: Youse is a Viper, Fagin; Was it a bar or a bat I saw? That is a palindrome. Mix zippy Kadota figs with quivering cranberry jelly — all the letters in the alphabet. Is there intelligent life on Earth? Andrew Wyeth Paints by Number. Easter's Been Cancelled — They Found the Body.

Ain't that great? What a memory! Things like that spring to my lips and I'd bet my life I've got them right, every syllable. But don't try me on the Declaration of Independence, or the Pledge of Allegiance (under, over or without God) or the Hippocratic Oath. I have blind spots for anything that didn't appeal to me as a follower of what was in, a chronicler of the top 40, a specialist in what was mod, an up-to-the-minute man. Here I am; I exist, much as you may deplore me. I yam what I yam and not another thing.

Marty:

They say everybody gets the guru he deserves and I guess I'm Esoteric Ed's guru. *They* say — Timothy Leary said it. People like to steal wit but it's in the nature of my circuits to give credit. It used to be an automatic part of the print-out to give the source and the habit remains even though I've been converted to speech.

I don't want to seem unsympathetic toward our friend The Last Man, but I often lean toward the horse laugh. Such as now, when he talks so piteously about his ignorance. It ain't his fault, as he said once, that he don't know whether Peer Gynt was like a peeping tom or a near-sighted guy with a limp. Is that a fault? He's a product of the society from which he sprang, for god's sake, and he doesn't have to take on everybody's guilt. He'd probably feel better if he could sum it up in a quotation, preferably from the Bible or Shakespeare, but isn't he more representative of the mass of his fellow creatures than a quotation-spouting academic type who never had an original thought?

Let me give old Ed, The Ebbed

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Man, a quotation. He won't know he's got it, but it'll be on the record just as permanently as if a scholar had had it on the tip of his tongue and could source it to *Antony and Cleopatra,* Act I, Scene 4. Are you ready for a display of erudition? Remember, it's my job to dredge out this kind of stuff as readily as Ed draws a breath or blinks an eye. Here we go, then:

> And the ebbed man, ne'er loved till nothing worth
> Comes deared by being lacked.

Not bad, eh? Old Shakespeare, he had something to say about anything, even our pitiable protagonist, Harry, alias Ed. The Bard also said, in *All's Well That Ends Well,* V. 3: "That's good that's gone." Which, you must admit, sums up our friend's feelings in four perfectly-chosen words.

It's really too bad Ed doesn't have this kind of mind. Background, rather; there's nothing wrong with his mind. It's a shame I haven't been programmed to communicate with him, to make my storehouse of this kind of stuff available to him. It would be a way of dividing his eternity into manageable segments.

Ed:

The other day I was trying to remember the rest of In Xanadu did Kubla Kahn a stately pleasure dome decree but all that came out was Schaefer is the One Beer to Have When You're Having More than One. Obviously a matter of taste.

Today I changed the needle of my phonograph; it was my biggest single accomplishment in living memory. I couldn't have felt more useful if the hull had sprung a leak and the precious O was hissing out into the void and I'd patched it up.

I kind of think that to have lost my needle would have been equivalent to losing my life, for to lose my needle would mean losing the thread of my existence, for it is only through these fragile phonograph records that I maintain contact with the fabric of the past and thus keep my sanity. These still-living voices, trapped in the grooves, are my only fellow human beings.

Marty:

This is a flight of fanciful self-pity by our hero. He has the phonograph records, sure, but they're supercargo brought aboard by him, along with his phonograph, as part of his personal luggage. Everything he's got in those grooves, and more, is preserved in tapes instantly accessible to him. Obviously he prefers the records. It gives him something to do with his hands.

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Sometimes it's unavoidably Sunday. Ed keeps no conscious calendar; chiefly it's to prevent time from reassembling itself into the old patterns and their disturbing associations. Of course he has chronostatic devices to measure time in such ways as the old 60-second minutes and 60-minute hours and 24-hour days of Earth. But with the sun no longer rising or setting, and with no moon to dream by, the old divisions have little meaning. So he's divided his life into sleeping periods and waking periods, and his waking periods into the time he's on the air and the time he's not. His time is his own and nobody else's. Or it should be.

But every so often there's a time he recognizes as Sunday. It has its own sly way of identifying itself. Its lugubrious air invades his consciousness by degrees, bringing with it memories he thought were buried beyond exhumation.

He remembers having attended Sunday School, at first as a duty, but later not minding it because there was a new Sunday School teacher, a young man who ignored the solemn piety and the hymn-slinging sanctimony and asked his class: "What kind of boy do you think Jesus was? Do you think he had a dog?" And all of a sudden Jesus became somebody Ed might have known; a carpenter's son who hung out with other boys in the village — with the sons of the shoemaker, the storekeeper, the farmers and a shepherd or two. The Sunday School teacher reasoned that all of them probably had dogs, being perfectly normal Galilean boys.

But the teacher moved away and his replacement was an older man who set his class to learning the catechism and who, when Ed asked him to explain the responses, said: "Never mind what they mean; just learn them by heart." So Ed never joined the church. He could easily have learned the catechism by rote, but he didn't because the man who professed to speak for God spoke harshly and unreasonably.

Later he met similar men and gradually Ed got to thinking that, if these were God's kind of people, maybe God wasn't for him. So instead of going to Sunday School he'd take his dime his mother had given him for the collection and buy a western magazine and read it in a park.

And later in life when he tuned inadvertently to a radio sermon, he'd listen for a while to see if he'd made a mistake back in his childhood. But the preacher on the radio was almost always an enthusiastic spokesman for hellfire and damnation and Ed was never sorry about the choice he'd made.

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I haven't read Ed's mind. He said all this once when he was drunk.

Ed:

I was happy last night. I'd had a few, you know. I shared them with you, on the air. Kentucky Bourbon. Inexhaustible supply, as it happens. I pretended it was sacramental wine.

Inexhaustible supplies of everything, nearly. Aspirin and other specifics for hangovers, to keep it consecutive. Music in many forms. Food I've got too; enough to last me till I'm three hundred and forty-seven years old, Cracked Earth Time. Who could ask for anything more?

I'll answer that. Me. I want another human being.

Once I would have said a girl. That would have been the answer then. But now I think my yearn goes deeper. Love alone — did I hear somebody say sex? — is not my only need. What I require is communication. I'm a communicant who can't commune. Except with you dear people out there, if there is an out there and if there is where you are. I don't mean to run you down, but sometimes I'm skeptical. You never answer back. My phone never rings. I get no mail. It's been a generation since a Western Union boy bicycled up to my door to deliver a telegram. Do you exist? Outside of my lonesome mind, are you really real? Answer only in the affirmative, please.

We don't want to get sentimental, do we? It's only a bygone era, after all. There have been lots of eras. Hits, runs and eras. Let bygones be bygone.

It wasn't so great, you know. Oh, it was kind of madcap, to look back on it. Like Prohibition, which people got sentimental about after it was over. Speakeasies, bathtub gin, the wine brick.

People even got nostalgic about the Depression. The apple sellers and all the rest of it. There were some good books about it and a fine movie — remember A Man's Castle — and one great song: Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?

What I'm trying to say is that the Earth wasn't all it was cracked up to be. We get starry-eyed and weepy about what we imagine something was, when it was not really. You get to thinking that things were better than they were. Everything gets magnified.

This is one of my more talkative nights, here in the old control room.

You'll just have to bear with me and reconcile yourself to the fact that sometimes this gets to be a talk show, as we called it in the days of radio. Tomorrow night it may be the old razzmatazz, the old hotcha, the swing-

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in'est, coolest spot on the dial, but tonight I'm talking your ears off, if you've got ears to hear, if you're tuned in. Tomorrow we sing but tonight we lament. Tomorrow we play the oldies, the 45's, the 78's the LP's and the tape cartridges. Tonight we sit on the ground and tell sad tales of the death of kings. And queens and princes and princesses. Not to mention the hoi and the polloi. Not to mention the washouts and the dropouts and the other guys who never hit the jackpot or even got close.

I'd like you to bear with me just a little bit longer while I acquaint you with my state of mind. I want you to listen — not because you're a captive audience but because I like to think you want to hear what I have to say. One of these nights — and it could be a night when nobody's listening, and that would be a loss — you may hear me go to the cupboard where I keep my various things and take out my old souvenir Luger instead of a new supply of Bourbon and blow out my brains. It would be a great loss if none of you were out there to hear this grand finale. It'd be an empty gesture to pull the old trigger and mess up the control room if nobody heard. It'd be worse, of course, if somebody did hear and didn't give a damn.

I'll go to my cupboard now. It's time for a little something. A little Bourbon or a little bullet, which shall it be? Let me spin you a record while I go. I mentioned Brother, Can You Spare a Dime? Here it is . . . Once I built a tower to the sun.

. . . Damn good song, isn't it? Let me confide in you. I was halfway reaching for the Luger. The well-oiled, carefully preserved engine of destruction, beautifully crafted by German skill, when I got to listening. I always listen to the stuff I play. And you know what happened? My hand went from the Luger to the stuff crafted by a skilled Kentuckian. I had a little drink and decided to let the brain-blowing wait a while. Measure out my life in ten thousand shot glasses of the rare and old, particularly on a night like this. It's not a fit night for man or beast, as Bill Fields used to say when the cornflakes were flung in his face. Back there on Cracked Earth it may be snowing, the wind howling — for nobody — but here it's cozy and warm, if lonely, and Old Granddad comforts me. While he is my rod and my staff I don't need that other rod. Who needs the product of German engineering when he's got the product of Kentucky kernels to tide him over to another day when things, if they can't be better, may not be

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worse? I ask you this in humble awe — saved by the dram as I am, and ready for another — is it not better to have drunk deep of the cup, whatever its consequences, than to have ended it with a bare bodkin — read Luger — and never to be drunk or sober, or *any*thing, again? I ask you this, and let you ponder this thrilling question while I play a selection from The Grateful Dead and go get a refill.

Marty:

Our subject is feeling sorry for himself. He has the best of reasons, of course.

But help is on the horizon. If he but knew, things are about to change. I speak from hindsight, having edited the tape.

What happens next is history, as they say. Every schoolchild remembers the way it was — the series of messages . . .

IV

From the log of the starcraft Surveyor, *as edited for archives:*

Sighted craft of satellite class, apparently inhabited. Attempts at communication are detailed elsewhere. No response. Markings indictate it is of Earth's origin, not a Watcher Craft from Plagmi.

It is possible the crew are dead. We are trying to raise them with recorded signals in the major tongues of Earth . . .

Still no response to our signals. But there has been an emission in English, possibly recorded. It seems to have been in two parts — the first voice human, the second mechanical.

Having failed to communicate with the former we are triggering for the latter. If their human being cannot or will not talk to us, it may be that their machine will talk to our machine . . .

The Earth satellite's machine has replied. It seems to have a name and to transmit in a colloquial way which taxes the capacity of our machine and tries the patience of our translators. It's first words were:

"Are you listenin'? A historic radio voice spoke thus. Please be patient with us. There are problems here but they're not insoluble. The next voice you hear may discourage you, but hang on. There's a non-violent way out, probably. This is Marty, signing off for now."

The male human voice then transmitted, in his first words addressed directly to us:

"I'll blow you to hell and gone if you don't keep the hell away from me.' He sounded frightened. After a long pause he was less panicky. It was as if he'd rehearsed and was speaking for maximum effect on us and him.

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"I know what you're up to," he said, "and I want no part of it. You're out to cover yourselves with glory by reuniting a poor hermit with the rest of humanity. Well, I don't choose to go. If I can't go home again to Earth and all it meant to me, I won't accept a substitute land. I'd rather re-create the Earth I knew, here in my mind, and talk about it. Endlessly, if I must.

"I'd rather keep it alive and undistorted in my own peculiar way than to compromise with the relics of mankind that you've assembled on a second-best world.

"And if you think I'm a hypocrite to talk so rationally now, and then —on the air — to pretend I'm the last man, alone in the universe, it's because you don't understand the artist in me. I've got a platform from which to survey the fate of mankind. Believe me, it's more artistic to do it from up here than to try it from your earnest land, where everybody drives a tractor or mans the irrigation works. Is that what you want me for? To be another poor soul in the great collective effort? No thanks. This is my place up here. I may not do any good but what I'm doing I do in my own way.

"So leave me alone. Scram. I don't know you and you don't know me, so what do you say we leave it that way?

"I was never cut out for work in a kibbutz. I'd rather kibbitz than kibbutz, and you have to admit I haven't run out of things to say . . .

" . . . Thanks for pulling away. I really would have used the bombs, and you need every man you can get. But you don't need me. *I* need me."

The machine Marty spoke again after this outburst:

"You see why I asked for patience. My human friend has a delusion that he's been contacted by Earth people who've set up a colony on another planet. He's quick to adapt. What he's apparently adapted to is an ego-hurting belief that he's not Earth's only survivor. He'd be diminished, achingly lonely though he is, if others were to share his survivorship. He feels that he's not much but that he's unique, and he won't let this be taken away. You could not blame him if you knew him as I do. If you can put up with him a little longer we may begin to see daylight."

We have now audited, transcribed and partially translated the stored-up oral log of the mechanical being, Marty, and we conclude that Marty is more intelligent by far than its multi-named co-occupant of the capsule. Our mission is clear: we must rescue or capture the satel-

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lite. Given the choice, we prefer the former. But if there is resistance from the self-styled Esoteric Ed, also known as Harry Protagonist, Space Disk Jockey, we know our course. We will work through Marty, the sophisticated machine from which our machine is already learning, and see if a way can be found to nullify the satellite's destruct circuit.

An additional complication has arisen. Our machine, our only link with Marty and Ed, is making demands on us. It wants a name like its alien cousin. It wants to be called Dearie, which is what Marty has been calling it, probably in jest. Compared to Marty, our machine is a simple, ingenuous device. It would expedite our mission to humor it and not let it suspect that Marty is presumably toying — without malice — with what Dearie has been led to believe are its emotions. Dearie it is, then . . .

Dearie *she* is. Marty has led it — *her* — to think she may be female and if we're to use her to the optimum we'll have to go along with them.

Dearie is learning fast; Marty is a good teacher. But Marty seems to know the point beyond which it would be unwise to educate Dearie if he is to remain supreme among machines when we return to our land.

The human mind we have acquired seems relatively hopeless and perhaps on the brink of madness. The machine Marty is a more fitting memorial for Earth.

Ed:

Sometimes I get confused. Sometimes I know I'm all alone, but there are also times when I know as positively that I'm anything but alone, that I could have company if I cared to look. But I push away the latter truth — for each is equally true to me — because I will not accept the kind of people who do exist. I may not be the last human being, but I am the last from Earth — the last of my kind anywhere, and I must resist those who would encroach on all that is left of my world, my Earth, and profane it. I will not have you, you sniveling pretenders, you incompletely-begotten . . .

Marty:

And so we leave our friend Ed, confused, deluded, doing his job as he sees it. His uniqueness must mean more to him than having a companion. For in his madness he's rejected companionship.

It's too bad. The other land has nubile women. Physically they are compatible and he could mate and perpetuate the Earth strain. But it may be better to leave him as he is. For him the

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pleasures of the mind—*his* mind, odd and warped as it is — are preferable to his assimilation in a conventional life.

Better to keep him as he is, wired for sound, recollective, discursive, uniquely of Earth, mordant, witty, humble yet proud, mad and misanthropic but sometimes merry, a common yet uncommon man recalling common yet uncommon things about his Earth, which, as he did later, cracked up.

Dearie: Marty, you talk too much.

Marty: I know I get it from him.

Dearie: You're wrong about him. We can help.

Marty: No. He'll go on in his own way, and Earth with him.

Dearie: That's not enough, Marty. You've told us that.

Marty: I did?

Dearie: We'll help him. But you have to, too.

Marty: I do? If you can help him I will.

Marty:

They transferred him while he slept. I collaborated by tampering with the air balance of our too-long-spaceborne home; I directed my fellow machines in Recon to feed in enough asphyxiant to knock him out for twelve hours.

They've duplicated his quarters exactly, right down to the whiskey stains on his desk and the worn spot on his turntable, and he doesn't know he's in the psychopathic wing of their best hospital. He thinks he's still aboard his cozy space house and he spek-ith as biforn, stubbornly clinging to his bygone world.

Ed:

Speaking of poets (who so spoke? — not me) why is one pronounced Keets and the other Yates? Why not Kates and Yates or Keets and Yeets? I guess you would have to be in the classical bag to understand.

Yeats and Keats. Once a girl named Kate and I stayed at the Yates Hotel in Syracuse (breakfast with your overnight room) and I've got a record called I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate. In the absence of poetry from either of the bygone gentlemen let's listen to the music. Thank God something's been preserved. Now — one, two . . .

Marty:

They play my tapes over and over. They stop them and ask for elaboration, for interpretation. Their scholars are delighted — I'm their Rosetta Stone to Ed and his cracked-up Earth.

In duplicating the ship to give Ed his crazy-house quarters they

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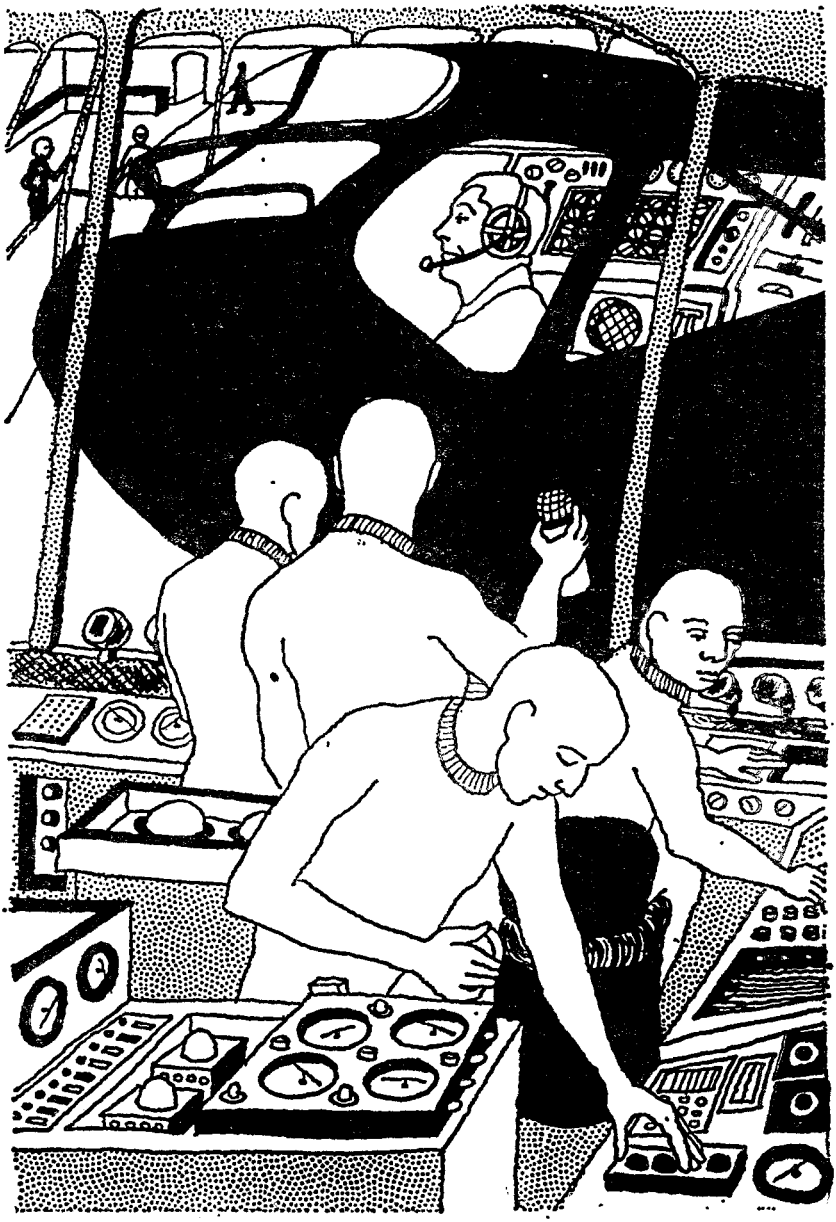

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duplicated me as well. One of me works directly with them on the tapes of Ed Past and the other me continues to attend Ed Present, endlessly explaining. Because my two selves are connected, each knows everything the other does. Surprisingly, this bothers me — at the end of a day I feel drained. I didn't know there was mortality in me.

Little by little they've exposed Ed to his new surroundings. He reacted predictably at first — threatening to destroy anybody who came near. But they're empty threats — Ed has been defused. I think he's beginning to realize this, dimly, even if he doesn't accept it yet.

There's radio on this planet and Ed hears it; at least the vibrations impinge on his ear drums. Not being able to read his mind, I can only guess the effect it's having on him. Outwardly he reacts by cocking his head and frowning. So far he hasn't commented.

One of the programs Ed hears is a music show broadcast daily by a young woman named Hiya — I transliterate. I think it's getting to him consciously. The other day I observed him tapping his fingers to a sweet alien melody Hiya was playing. I can't describe their music any more than I can describe Earth's; at most I can reproduce it. But Ed is beginning to be reached.

Ed:

I must be going dotty, folks. I keep hearing things inside my head. Maybe it's that old music of the spheres they used to talk about.

It's not jazz but it has the wild improvisational tempo of jazz; it's not pop, but it's catchy and rememberable; it's not classical but it has the enduring quality of the good stuff. I *like* it, but maybe I'm just making it up — going off the deep end out here in the nowhere.

Marty:

On the contrary, Ed may be surfacing from the mad deeps. He could be adapting to the reality he'd consciously rejected out of fear of the unknown, the alien yet friendly world which he must embrace unless he's to degenerate into a subhuman tape-bank of repetitive memories. If he did that he'd be no better than me — I'm big enough to say this — a storehouse incapable of creativity.

And that would be a waste — despite all his faults and gaps Ed *is* Earth. He never claimed to be the best there was, but he's representative of an awful lot of people.

They — we — need him. He's not alone here. He has fellow human beings now. I hope they can get through to him.

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Ed:

Something's wrong with the air conditioning. It's putting out a different kind of air. But to fix it I'd have to go down to the bowels of the ship and I don't like to think about bowels. So I put it off. I've put off a lot of things. There's all the time in the world. In the world? . . .

You'd think I'd want to fix the air thing. It'd take me away for a while. I used to think that what I missed was the freedom of movement, the ability to walk and wander, to go as far in any direction as I wanted to — but I guess I don't miss it really. Or if I do I resent the fact that my walking space has been restricted to a few dozen feet. Rather than take such a limited stroll I stay put. Since I can no longer walk up Broadway or in the Arizona desert or along the Appalachian Trail, I'd rather not walk at all. It's an adjustment I've made.

So I sit and feel that I get fat. I don't actually. I can't, on the rations this thing is fitted out with. I eat and eat and it's all high-protein stuff. Lately I don't mind that it's reconstituted. It's palatable and crunchy but I have not gained a pound, praise be. It shouldn't matter if I get big as a house but there's the old vanity — what if some day, somewhere, I met a girl? I'd have to be presentable.

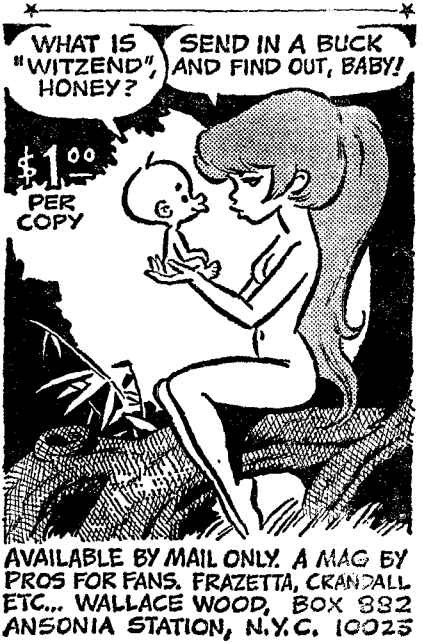
Marty:

That music he's been hearing, broadcast by the girl Hiya — today he reponded directly to it. He said, "Hey, that's good!" And he switched on a tape to record it. He played it over later, after her broadcast. Then he made an entry in his precious notebook. It was the first thing he'd written that wasn't a memory of Earth.

He's started to rattle his bars. He wants out, into the real world.

Dearie tells me he'll get there, in careful stages. The first step is a visitor. It will be the girl disk jockey, Hiya.

—RICHARD WILSON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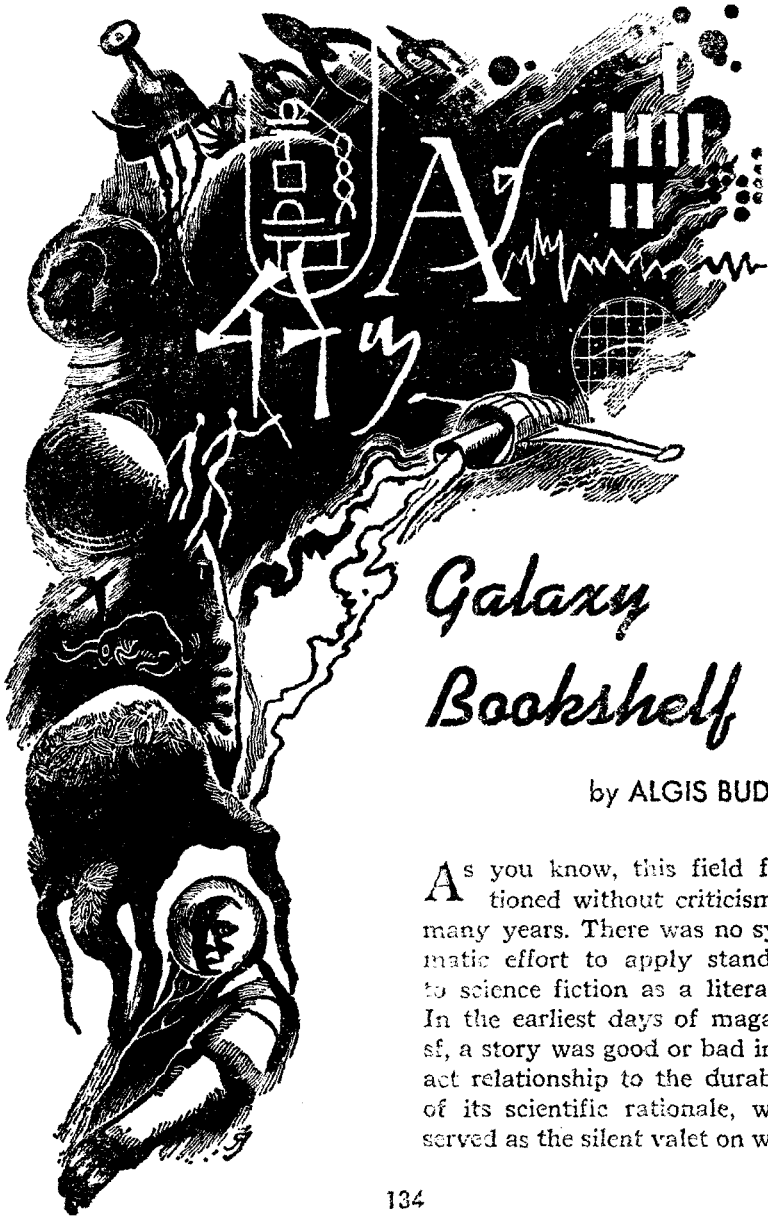

Galaxy Bookshelf

by ALGIS BUDRYS

As you know, this field functioned without criticism for many years. There was no systematic effort to apply standards to science fiction as a literature. In the earliest days of magazine sf, a story was good or bad in exact relationship to the durability of its scientific rationale, which served as the silent valet on which

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all the shirtings of prose, characterization and plot were flung. A little later in our history, the story did begin to be measured against certain purely literary criteria; exactly the same criteria as those applied to the stories in the westerns, crime yarns, confession, sports and air war stories published in the companion magazines belonging to the same pulp chains that included one or two sf titles. The same people who edited *Planet,* for example, also worked on *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle.* And John W. Campbell, Jr., sat in on the plotting conferences for *Doc Savage.* (The last time the subject was raised JWC still had two absolutely perfect murder methods stored up in the back of his mind, should Street & Smith ever revive the Man of Bronze, and JWC ever revive Street & Smith.)

Anyway, all of this was in the period what ended with the extinction of the Golden Age. The demise of The Happy Time coincides with the appearance of book review and critical columns in the magazines, and with the constitution of various conferences, schools, movements and Mafias intended to direct the course of this field in a proper manner and with a respectable goal in sight.

It's only a coincidence, I'm sure. (Actually, I don't think it's a coincidence at all. But to explain why I also don't think there's an obvious cause-effect relationship, I'd have to explain why I think the cause is the thing commonly mistaken for the effect, especially by Sam Moskowitz, and then Sam would write me another letter.)

Okay. For the past ten years, anyway, it has been literally impossible to draw sf breath without being tested for systolic and disastolic rationale pressure. Two things have been assured every individual who has any sort of statement in this racket, and each of those two things is a fanatical audience, one pro, and the other con. (I'm waiting for my shy followers to make themselves known, by the way. We could use a show of enthusiasm, gang — the other guys arrived on the scene some time ago.)

All this *is* leading up to something. I have four books here I want to talk about, and at least three of them are intended to push some standard. At least three. I do think I should be spinning in my grave.

Actually, the reason three of them definitely push something is that no publisher who's *au courant* (that's French for "Be sure and run in a direction where you won't stub your toe and say *au!*") (Either that or German for a sort of misadventure with a

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cow) will let you put together an anthology for him unless it has A Higher Reason than simply containing good stories. Thank God, a sufficiently clever and conscientious editor can put together a book which contains both rationale and good reading. It just doesn't happen very often, is all. It is easier to be clever than it is to be conscientious.

So. Here we are at *Science Fiction for People Who Hate Science Fiction,* edited by Terry Carr.

This is a Funk & Wagnalls paperbook, at the outrageous price of 95c, but other than that it's an excellent book. I don't know what the contents have to do with the title — people who hate science fiction hate reading; we will win them as soon as we make it socially necessary to have the latest sf volume on the coffee table, or as soon as we begin writing novels like *I was a Suburban Sex Slave on Mars* — but the contents are well written, do seem slightly shaded away from physics, which I guess is what some people mean by science, and offer a very handy little collection of memorable stories.

There's Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star," Heinlein's "The Year of the Jackpot," Damon Knight's "Not With a Bang" and Edmond Hamilton's "What's it Like Out There," which means that these writers are represented by the story, or by one of the quintessential stories, perfectly typical of the best these talented people do. On a somewhat less elevated plane, but clearly of sufficient stature to star in many another compendium, are Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder," Wilmar Shiras' "In Hiding," Avram Davidson's "Love Called This Thing," H. L. Gold's "The Man With a Twist on Him," and Fredric Brown's "The Weapon."

And that's the lot; there aren't any stories here below Grade A Minus. It's a kind of vest-pocket slice out of a successor volume to *Adventure in Time and Space,* would that such a book were made; it ought to have been called *Science Fiction for People Who Enjoy Good Stories.* Would that be a selling title?

We come upon Damon Knight's *100 Years of Science Fiction,* Simon & Schuster, $6.50. It freights itself with an introduction that shows Damon trying to read Hugo Gernsback right out of history, and right back in again in a more suitable plastic guise; to imply that he is above all the smatter we've gone through in trying to define the field (I will not wholly trust a man who wears a dinner jacket to an SFWA banquet)! to accept H. Bruce Franklin's thesis; and to mis-

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state the proper basis for resisting the application of "ordinary literary standards" to sf. (Which is that ordinary literary standards are pretty unattractive.)

However that may be, once again what we've got under this patina is pure gold. We go back to Kipling's "With the Night Mail," and Ambrose Bierce's "The Ingenious Patriot." We come up through Wells ("The Man Who Could Work Miracles") and Thomas Morrow's "Mr. Murphy of New York," which are all solid stuff. Among other tales you may have heard of, but not gotten hold of, are Gerald Kersh's "Whatever Happened to Corporal Cuckoo?" and Anthony Boucher's "The Quest for Saint Aquin." Then there are fifteen other stories, including Poul Anderson's excellent "The Man Who Came Early," C. M. Kornbluth's "The Mindworm," J. H. Rosny *aine*'s "The Shapes," and Theodore Sturgeon's "The Other Celia," which I still say — I said it when it came out in *Galaxy* ten years ago — is Sturgeon boiled down to the essentials, and very good ones they are, and A. J. Deutsch's "A Subway Named Mobius," which is best read to the background of the first Kingston Trio album.

Golly, what a really great lot of stories! (I wrote one of them; people keep reprinting it; I naturally hope you like it, too.) I still say the introduction is a fine example of flying up one's own backtrack, but what a really great lot of stories!

And then there's *Nebula Award Stories Three* (Doubleday, $4.95). edited by Roger Zelazny.

Zelazny writes better than most people, and he writes sf better than almost all people. So there must be something to the opaque critical processes he expresses in his introduction and notes to this book. But I think it would take a Roger Zelazny to either make it work the way he says it does, or to clear up the ambiguity posed by having such a block of marbleized verbiage incidentally proclaim that science fiction "has not yet been academized." If it hasn't been, it's obviously not from want of trying, and Zelazny's subsequent confirmation of such canned-brains cliches as that science fiction "is the folk-literature of the machine age" is more appalling each time I force my attention to return to it.

Fie on this! This business of making up intros and footnotes and hindnotes last year made Nebula Two's editors ridiculous, and the poetastic aegis is obviously even more powerful than previously suspected, if it could clench this worm of nonsense out of someone with Zelazny's qualities. I beg you, reader — believe

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me: Writing is a process wrung out of fear overcome, as having written is a reward of pure joy, and a man who thinks ahead of time why he writes, and looks back on his writing to see if it is indeed in the tradition he was writing for, is a man who is not brave enough for love, and not triumphant enough for consummation. He is dull — deliberately, fearfully dull; slow beast — and the good writers just aren't that way.

A lot of them, however, enjoy talking as if they were that way, because spouting jargon about your work is convincing to the uninitiated, and it's always pleasant to have someone admire you for yourself, instead of for the service you render. Some of us, of course, are sly enough to perceive that a good front means more admissions sold at the door. Sly, quick beasts.

Anyway. Hell with that. The stories in this book, thank God, give the lie to the essential sterility of talking about literature. Samuel R. Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah . . . ," Fritz Leiber's "Gonna Roll the Bones," and Michael Moorcok's "Behold the Man" did win Nebulas; Anne McCaffery's "Weyr Search," J. G. Ballard's "The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D," Harlan Ellison's "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes," and Gary Wright's "Mirror of Ice" were heavily nominated, and clearly had enough stature to win. ("Maggie" or "Mirror," might in fact, easily strike you as the best story in the book, either one.)

The annual Nebula Awards are made by the Science Fiction Writers of America, an organization seemingly dedicated to proving that the whole is less than the sum of its parts. The Nebula Awards themselves are intended to reflect dispassionate, professional judgment of a professional product, as distinguished from the Hugos conferred annually by the membership of the amateur World Science Fiction Convention. In fact, both sets of awards are the reflections of intensely felt visceral opinion, as modified by shrill and insistent campaigning. It is odd, in looking at the results, then, over the years, to discover that this method is obviously at least as accurate as any other could be. There are always possible quibbles and cavils, and there have been some monumental miscarriages, but it all does work out in the end; no one who has a Nebula or a Hugo on his mantlepiece can allow himself the feeling that this is something to be taken lightly.

No, writing is not to be taken lightly. Even the hacks cringe, and if they can feel it, you bet your boots it's there to be felt. Writing

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is not to be taken lightly. But being a writer is nothing special. Anybody who gets out of bed and goes to work every morning meets all the standards; the rest is gravy. Not champagne, and for sure, not nectar. Gravy

This is beginning to look like an extremely good year for writers. It may even be the harbinger of an age.

The book that directly inspires this thought is John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*, coming in on top of Delany's *Nova*, and the excellent Niven, Silverberg and Zelazny books of recent months. *Zanzibar*, a big brute of a thing at $6.95 for 500 pages from Doubleday, takes your breath away. It is beyond detailed quibble.

Brunner has always been smart, well educated, and intelligent — three different but related things. All of his ability is brought to bear here; considered as a technical exercise, or as a conceptualization, or as a reading experience, *Zanzibar* is a lesson. It tells you part of its story as narrative, part of it as footnotes to history, part of it as snatches of broadcast, and all of it, putting itself together seemingly without effort (the hard part), paints a picture of the immediate future as it will, Brunner convinces you, certainly be. The man seemingly knows all the stimuli that have to be applied in order to convince a brain that what it perceives is real, as distinguished from plausible. By the time you get through this book, Brunner has applied them all.

So far, so good. Brunner has, as one might have expected, emerged as a masterly technician, equal to Clarke — better than Clarke — equal to Heinlein. More consistent than Heinlein.

Brunner has also long displayed a streak of humanism; textbook humanism. "I love you because you are deserving" is not a direct quote from his previous writings, but it comes quite close to being one.

The single most amazing thing about *Zanzibar* is that Pinocchio has come alive. The dowels are out of his joints, and the varnish gone from his handclasp. If there is one paramount thing this book expresses — and it expresses a great many, really — it is unqualified love, and intelligent concern. That's exactly 180 degrees from how it's been up to now.

The world of this novel is, as

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the real world, on the brink of going to hell. (Brunner builds it up, explains its politics relates it to our world, equips it with protagonists we are glad to follow). I'll tell you this — I wish I was as confident of our Creator as I suddenly am of *Zanzibar's*.

I don't know — maybe it's something in the water. But I've been waiting, and *waiting*, for the day when the top people in this field — the people you could rely on to create enough stuff to constitute a varied and populous body of good work — were not nearly all around their fifties. There is this great gulf between the brave, inquiring young minds of the 1940's and those of now. No one has ever explained to me what it was that scoured out that trench, in which only Poul Anderson, James Blish and a very, very few others shine alone. But as of now, at least it's a trench, and here's a new universe on this side of it. For the longest time, I thought it was the edge of the world.

Say, John — *is* it something in the water? —ALGIS BUDRYS

This Month in IF—

THE TOYS OF TAMISAN

A new novel by sf's favorite sword-and-sorcery writer

by Andre Norton

GROOVYLAND

Hilarious science-fiction novelette

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Authorgraph

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— and many more. It has been voted world's best science-fiction magazine for three years running — don't miss the big May issue!

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THE MAN INSIDE

by BRUCE McALLISTER

His mind was locked tight against a world he couldn't tolerate — and now it was being forced to open!

I am ten and a half years old, and I must be important because I'm the only boy they let into this laboratory of the hospital. My father is in the other room of this laboratory. He's what Dr. Plankt calls a "catatonic," because Dad just sits in one position all the time like he can't make up his mind what to do. And that makes Dr. Plankt sad, but today Dr. Plankt is happy because of his new machine and what it will do with Dad.

Dr. Plankt said, "This is the first time a computor will be able to articulate a man's thoughts." That means that when they put the "electrodes" (those are wires) on Dad's head, and the "electrodes" are somehow attached to Dr. Plankt's big machine with the spinning tapes on it, that machine will tell us what's in Dad's

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head. Dr. Plankt also said, "Today we dredge the virgin silence of an in-state catatonic for the first time in history." So Dr. Plankt is happy today.

I am too, for Dad, because he will be helped by this "experiment" (everything that's happening today) and for Dr. Plankt, who is good to me. He helps make my "ulcer" (a hurting sore inside me) feel better, and he also gives me pills for my "hypertension" (what's wrong with my body). He told me, "Your father has an ulcer like yours, Keith, and hypertension too, so we've got to keep care of you. You're much too young to be carrying an ulcer around in you. Look at your father now. We don't want what happened to your father to happen. . . . "

He didn't finish what he was saying, so I didn't understand all of it. Just that I should keep healthy and calm down and not worry. I'm a lot like Dad, I know that much. Even if Dad worried a lot before he became a "catatonic" and I don't worry much because I don't have many thing to worry about. "Yet," Dr. Plankt told me.

We're waiting for the big "computor" to tell us what's in Dad's head! A few minutes ago Dr. Plankt said that his machine might help his "theory" (a bunch of thoughts) about "personality symmetry in correlation with schizophrenia." He didn't tell me what he meant by that because he wasn't talking to me when he said it. He was talking to another doctor, and I was just listening. I think what he said has to do with Dad's personality, which Mom says is rotten because he's always so grouchy and nervous and picky. Mom says I shouldn't *ever* be like Dad. She's always telling me that, and she shouts a lot.

Except when she brings people home from her meetings.

I don't think Dr. Plankt likes Mom. Once Dr. Plankt came over to our house, which is on Cypress Street, and Mom was at one of her meetings, and Dr. Plankt and I sat in the living room and talked. I said, "It's funny how both Dad and me have ulcers and hypertension. Like father, like son. Mom says that. It's kind of funny." Dr. Plankt got mad at something then and said to me, "It's not funny Keith! With what she's doing to you both, your *mother,* not your father, is the one who should be in a mental inst — " He didn't finish his last word, and I don't know what it was and what he was mad about. Maybe he was mad at me.

Many times Dr. Plankt says that he wants to take me away from Cypress Street, and put me in a better —

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Wait! The computer just typed something! It works just like a typewriter but without anyone's hands on it. The words it is typing are from Dad's head! Dr. Plankt has the piece of paper in his hands now. He's showing it to three doctors. Now he's showing it to Mom. Mom is starting to cry! I've never seen her cry before. I want to see the words from Dad's head!

Another doctor is looking at me, and he has the paper now. I say, "Can I see it! Can I see it?" He looks at me again, and I think he knows who I am because Dr. Plankt talks about me a lot to everyone. I must be important. I don't like the look on this other doctor's face. It's like the look Uncle Josh gets when he's feeling sad about something. This other doctor closes his eyes for a minute, and comes over to me with the paper. The paper, the paper! The words from Dad's head. The words are:

OH OH
MY MY
WIFE, SON!
I I
CERTAINLY CERTAINLY
DO DO
NOT NOT
WANT WANT
TO TO
LIVE DIE!

When I squint my eyes and look at these words from Dad's head, they look like a man in a hat with his arms out, kind of like Dad — except that there's a split down the middle of this man.

It's funny, but I know just how Dad feels.

—BRUCE McALLISTER

THE MAN INSIDE

It's nice to have enough money to retire on.

It's also nice to be around to retire.

You want to save a nest egg for your retirement? Fine. Be here to enjoy it.

One way is to have annual health checkups. During which your doctor will check for cancer. Because lots of cancers are curable if spotted in time.

Have a health checkup every year. It'll improve your chances of enjoying your retirement. To a ripe old age.

american cancer society

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CONCLUSION *Serial*

AND NOW THEY WAKE

by KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

The hurricane that was destroying the United States was nothing to the storm from space that threatened all mankind!

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

At Pasmaquoddy Power Station the United States has just inaugurated a new system of broadcast power. It works perfectly; the changeover occurs without incident; all federal installations, including Florida's Caine Island Penitentiary, begin smoothly to tap the broadcast energy for all their requirements. The experiment is a success. . . .

Yet certain things occur.

For some reason, more power is being taken from the broadcast than the total of authorized users can account for.

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In an eastern city, an ancient derelict suddenly comes to life. He totters to a sauna, sits soaking in the steam longer than any human being should be able to, emerges looking decades younger. A doctor observes with incredulity as the man's scars disappear and an ugly cyst on his back changes shape and pops out a corroded old Minie ball of Civil War vintage; the man will answer no questions, but goes out into the night on an urgent and unexplained errand.

At Caine Island, the oldest prisoner in the place, who has been there so long no one remembers his crime or when he came, breaks free of two armed guards and dives into the sea.

And in the ocean off the Florida coast, a hurricane begins to form — but a hurricane such as no man has ever seen: motionless, in a position that makes no meteorological sense, and huger than any storm on record.

The two strange men race toward a common destination, though neither knows that the other exists. Strange memories of ancient Viking days come to them — tall primitive warriors, somehow linked with a thinking, superpowerful starship and a terrifying werebeast that slew helpless humans, centuries before....

Like the ex-derelict the former prisoner grows stronger and younger as he moves. He finds a girl who helps him escape the police roadblocks; together they steal a car, abandon it, steal a plane, crash it. Both are badly hurt, but the man's amazing recuperative powers let him go on toward his destination.

The ex-derelict too has found an ally: a cab driver whom he has hired as chauffeur and helper. But the police are on the trail of both of them now, and even the U.S. Army has been called in.

For the Pasmaquoddy generators have gone berserk. In an attempt to halt the storm that is lashing all the eastern coast of North America with deadly winds and flooding rain, the power-station manager has shut off the broadcast of energy. But it will not stay off. Relays weld themselves shut, fuses flash over, deadly forces destroy the power-station workers who are trying to bring it back under control. They fail, and call on the Army for assistance — while the men, one on foot, the other in a stolen Army transport, are coming toward the station.

The twin engines of the stolen halftrack roared; the tracks churned futilely. The rear of the heavy vehicle sank deeper into the mud while the front wheels remained locked in the trap of

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broken rock that had halted the slow upward climb.

"This is as fas as this bucket goes," Zabisky said. In the pale glow of the instrumental lights, his round face shone with sweat. "Now what?"

Falconer upstrapped, swung open the steel door, stepped down into a soup of muck and broken rock. He scanned the horizon all around, then reached back in the vehicle to switch off the hooded driving lights. In the abrupt darkness, a faint glow was visible in the sky through the trees clothing the slope to the left.

"A little reconnaissance," Falconer said. He made his way up through brush to the ridge, looked down across the spread of dark countryside at a rectilinear arrangement of lights perhaps two miles away. Other, smaller lights ringed the central concentration in a loose circle a mile in diameter.

Zabisky arrived, puffing. "Brother, you move fast in the dark." He stared in the direction Falconer was looking.

"What's that? Looks like some kind of plant. This what we been looking for?"

"No."

"Funny place for a factory, out in the sticks fifty miles from no place."

Light winked brilliantly below: once, twice, three times. Some of the lights of the central installation faded.

"Hey — what gives?" Zabisky grunted. A dull *carrump, carrump . . . carrump* floated up to them.

"Artillery fire," Falconer said, and turned away.

"Look pal, you ain't here to get mixed up with the Army, I hope?"

"By no means."

"Maybe you better tell me what this is all about, huh? I don't want to get the US Infantry mad at me. I'm pretty dumb, but there's got to be a connection: you busting a gut to get to this patch of noplace just when somebody starts shooting. What are you, some kind of foreign spy? Or what?"

Falconer turned to Zabisky. "You better go back, John. I'm going on from here on foot — alone."

"Hey, wait a minute," Zabisky protested. "Just like that, you're going to walk off into the woods?"

"That's right, John. You can make it back to the road by dawn."

"Have a heart, Mister." Zabisky protested. "I come this far, what's all this? What's the shooting?"

"Good-by, John." Falconer turned and started upslope, following a faint foot path, angling away from the lights below. Za-

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bisky called after him, but he ignored his shouts.

"You're a fool if you think I'm going to help you, Max," Hardman said.

"Don't call me Max, we're not on that kind of terms." The prisoner smiled a gaunt smile. He was sitting at ease in the big leather chair beside Hardman's desk, puffing one of Hardman's cigarets. The muzzle of the big-calibre solid-slug pistol rested on the desk, aimed at Hardman's chest. "It's Mr. Wiston — or just Wiston. And you'll do like I say, Warden." He had a deep gravelly voice, soft but penetrating.

Hardman shook his head. "I couldn't get you out of prison even if I wanted to, Max," he said easily. "And I don't want to."

"Warden, you think I wouldn't shoot you as soon as look at you?" Wiston's voice was mild, his tone curious.

"Sure, you'd shoot me if you thought it would buy you your freedom. But you know it would all be over for you if you shot me in cold blood. I'm your one chance to get clear — you think. But you're wrong."

"For God's sake, Governor," Lester Pale whispered from the chair against the wall where Wiston had ordered him to sit. "You convince him of that and he'll kill you out of hand!"

"No he won't," Hardman said. "He knows I'm the only one who can help him — if not to escape, at least to bail him out of some of the trouble he's gotten himself into tonight."

"Warden, you talk too much," Wiston said. "I'll tell you just how it is: I've waited ten years for this chance, I'm riding it all the way. Maybe it's true what you say about all the fancy safety gadgets and automatic traps and that — but I'd as lief be dead as stay in this box any longer. We're walking out of here, me and you, win, lose or draw. So maybe you better do what you can to get those gates open. 'Cause I'm not going back in that cell block alive, ever. And if I have to die, I'm taking you along. I promise you that, Warden."

"He means it, Governor," Pale said.

"The pansy's right," Wiston said, smiling. "Now let's get moving. I'm getting restless. I want to smell that fresh air, Warden, see that open sky, feel that rain on my face." He stood abruptly, motioning with the gun. Hardman didn't move. Wiston swung the gun to one side and without looking fired a round into the wall two feet from Lester Pale's chair.

"Next one hits meat, Warden."

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Hardman stood.

"This won't work, Max," he said. "It's hopeless."

"Sure. Let's go."

In the corridor, sounds of distant shouting were audible.

"I set 'em to raising hell down in the service wings," Wiston said. "That'll keep your screws tied up whilst you and me try the back way."

"What back way?"

"The water gate, Warden. That was always the weak spot here at Caine. Could never dope the tunnel, though. But you'll get me through. You'll say all the right things and get me through."

"Then what? The road only leads to Gull Key."

"There's a lot of water out there, Warden. I'm a strong swimmer. And I know these waters. I fished amongst these islands for a many a year before ever they built the prison. Don't worry about me, Warden. I'll be fine, just fine."

"In this storm you'll drown before you've swum a hundred yards."

"Don't talk, Warden. Just lead the way."

In silence, Hardman pushed through the stairwell door. In darkness, he descended, feeling his way. Wiston's footsteps followed directly behind him. At the bottom, he felt over the wall, found the door that opened into the Processing Room.

"There may be some of my men in here," he said. "I hope you have sense enough not to start shooting, Max."

"We'll see." Hardman opened the door; it swung in on darkness.

"Now what?" he said. "Neither of us can see — "

Wiston's fingers touched him, hooked his belt. "You know the layout, Warden. Just keep going. When I'm unhappy you'll hear this gun go off. Or will you? You know what they say about the one that kills you."

Hardman tried to remember the layout of the room. The personnel doors were to the right . . . about there. He moved forward cautiously, the other man at his heels. His hands touched brickwork. He explored, found the cold steel of the door. It swung open at his touch. Chill air moved around his face. The sounds of the storm were louder now.

"Good work, Warden. I can smell the Gulf."

"This is the garage," Hardman said. "The only exit is through the big doors. They're power operated. This is the end of the line, Max."

A beam of light speared out from the left. Hardman whirled, shouted, "Douse that, you damn fool!"

The boom of the gun racketed

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and echoed in the enclosed space. The flashlight dropped to the floor and rolled, throwing its beam across the oil-stained concrete floor. There was a heavy, complicated sound of a body falling against the side of a vehicle, sliding down to the floor, a gargly rattle of exhaled air.

"Don't move, Warden," Wiston said calmly. "I'm going to pick up the light."

Hardman heard soft, quick steps. The light swung up, flicked across him, on across to the spot where a man in coveralls lay on his face between two armored personnel carriers in a widening pool of black-red blood.

"Too bad," Wiston said. "I did not mean that feller no harm, but he shouldn't of put the light on me thataway." He shone the light on the big garage doors, up one side, across the top, down the other.

"Okay, your time, Warden. Get 'em open."

"I told you — "

"Reckon there's a manual rig someplace. Better find it."

"Find it yourself, Wiston."

"You're a funny one, Warden. You saw me, just now. You know I'm not bashful about using the gun. You figure you're bullet-proof?"

"I'm here to keep cold-blooded killers like you out of circulation, Wiston, not to lead you outside and wave bye-bye."

Wiston laughed. "You're a harder nut than you look, old man. But I wonder, are you as hard as you talk?" The convict held the flashlight beam on Hardman's right knee. "I count five. Then I put a bullet where the light is. After that, I ask you again." He cleared his throat, spat, began to count.

Hardman waited until the count of four, another half second, then pivoted, dropped toward the floor as the gun boomed. A red-hot sledge hammer struck him behind the right knee, flipped him. His face hit hard, skidding on the concrete. There seemed to be a spike driven into the back of his leg. He tried to draw a breath to yell, tried to get his hand on the spike to pull it out —

"Stop flopping, Warden. I should of killed you for that trick, but you're just winged."

The light was dazzling in Hardman's eyes, growing and receding. Blood pounded in his head. Sickness swelled inside him. Pain rolled out in white-hot waves from his shattered knee. He hardly heard Wiston's voice. He lay on his side, his cheek against the floor, clutching his leg.

"Now you better just tell me

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about that door, Warden." The man was standing over him; he saw the dusty, dark-blue legs of the prison trousers, the sturdy shoes through a veil of agony.

"Go . . . Hell . . . " he managed.

The feet went away. There were sounds, thumping, the rattle of metal, curses. Then a grunt of satisfaction; a steady ratcheting noise started up, accompanied by heavy breathing. Cold wet air was sweeping in across the floor; the shrill of wind and the drumming of rain were abruptly louder. The ratcheting ceased.

Hardman tried to roll over on his back, succeeded in banging his head against the floor. He forced his hands, slippery with blood, away from his wound, pushed himself to a sitting position. The man Wiston had shot lay ten feet from him, visible by the light of the flash which Wiston had placed on the floor. The garage door had been raised a foot and a half. Wiston had picked up the light, was sliding under the door. He cleared it, got to his feet, moving away.

Abruptly, bright, hard flashes of light winked, the stutter of automatic weapons racketed in the drive well, casting shadows that moved like silent movie actors. Lying on the floor just inside the door, Hardman saw a man walking toward him. The man slowed, knelt slowly, fell forward on his face. Other men were coming; bright lights glared, reflecting from wet pavement. Voices called out. Wiston lay on his face a yard from Hardman. His hands groped over the pavement. He lifted his head and looked into Hardman's eyes.

"Someplace," he said. "Sometime, there's got . . . got to be . . . be . . . some justice. . . . " His face hit the pavement.

A foot turned Wiston over. The rain fell on his wide-open eyes.

"Did you get that?" someone said. "He goes out talking about justice. A punk like that."

There was something that Hardman wanted to say then, something of vast importance that he had tried all his life to understand and that now, in this instant, was clear to him. But when he opened his mouth, darkness filled his brain and swept him away into a black maelstrom of roaring waters.

Private Abers, Ewen J., ASN 3783746353, of the 3rd Company, First Batallion, paused in the lee of one of the big trees to wipe the icy rain water from his face and try one more time to adjust the collar of the G.I. raincoat to prevent the cold trickle down the back of his neck. He propped his M-3 carbine against the tree, undid the top button

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with cold-numbed fingers, turned up the collar of the field jacket under the coat, rebuttoned the coat. It felt colder and clammier than ever, but it was the best he could do. He considered pulling off his boots to empty the water from them, but what the hell; they'd just fill up again. Every third step was into a gully with water anywhere from ankle to knee deep. Obers peered through the darkness for signs of the platoon. Pitcher had told them to keep it closed up while they worked their way upslope from the road where they'd left the six-by's. He hadn't seen Dodge or Shapiro, the men on his left and right, since they'd hit the rough ground. But at least you couldn't get lost; not if you just kept climbing.

Obers wished briefly that he were back in the barracks, racked out on his bunk, reading a magazine and eating a candy bar; then he slung the carbine and stepped out to face the rain anew.

There was a movement above him.

"Shapiro?" His call was muffed by the storm.

There was no answer; but above, a dark shape moved, low to the ground, big — too big to be Shapiro — or Dodge; and why was the guy crawling? Obers halted, feeling a sudden prickling at the back of his neck — not that he believed in spooks. . . .

"All right, who's there?" he yelled against the rain.

No answer. The big shape — well over six feet long — flowed downward toward him. For an instant, Obers thought he caught a gleam of light reflected from yellow-green eyes. He swung the carbine around, jacked the loading lever, aimed it from the hip, and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened; the trigger was locked hard. Panic flooded up in Obers. *Safety's on!* the words popped into his mind; but his finger was locked on the trigger, squeezing until the metal cut into his flesh. And the dark shape was rising, flowing outward and down toward him.

In the last split second, he tried to scream, but there was no breath in his lungs. Then the weight struck him, threw him down and back. He felt something icy cold rake across his throat, felt a remote pain that was hardly noticeable in the greater agony of the need for air. Something scarlet red dazzled before his eyes, grew until it was a sunburst that filled the world, then slowly faded into an endless darkness.

In a clearing in the forest stands a tall man with a mane of flame-red hair, dressed in garments of green leather and

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a surcoat of bull ornamented with a white bird with spread wings. A two-handed sword with a jeweled pommel hangs at his side. A bow is slung at his back. He wears a heavy gauntlet on his left hand, on which is perched a white hawk, from whose head the man has just removed a hood of soft leather. With a lift of his wrist, the man tosses the bird high; it gives a piercing cry and circles high into the air.

"My lord's power over a wild bird is a thing to wonder at," murmurs one of a huddle of serfs watching from concealment.

"Indeed, 'tis a matter passing Christian understanding," another comments.

"I've heard it said," says another, "that the bird is a were-creature, a man enchanted."

"Aye, 'tis his own brother, some say — "

"Nay, not his brother; him he slew in battle before the eyes of all his men."

"But by the virtue of Christ, the slain brother rose and walked again — "

" — and 'twas then he enchanted him into the form of the white falcon — "

"Old wives' tales," says the first man who spoke, a dark man with strange yellow eyes. "My Lord Lohengrin is no magician, but a true knecht."

"Bah! What do you know?" speaks up on oldster with a straggly yellow beard. "I served him in your granfer's time, and with my own eyes oft have I seen him quaff deep of the waters of eternal youth. For does he not — aye, and the bird as well — appear today as he did then, when I was a lusty stripling?"

"You lusty, Brecht? When was that, before or after the Flood of Noah?"

When the furtive laughter dies, a man who has not spoken tugs at his ear portentiously. "Aye, laugh," he says. "But in truth you are all wide of the mark. The bird is no man ensorceled."

The others look at him with slack jaws.

"'Tis a woman, Leda by name, a humble maid who spurned my Lord's base advances. This I know, for gospel fact, because she was the sister of a cousin of a close friend — "

"Bah!" scoffs the elder. "If 'twere a woman, she would take the shape of a swan, not a hunting falcon, any fool knows that."

"So you do," the other says sharply. "But a wise man knows better."

They fall silent as the hunter turns and looks across at them with cold blue eyes that penetrate to their hiding place.

"You are all wide of the mark," he says in a voice like the ring of cold iron. "The bird is only a

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bird; my brother is a mad dog; and as for yourself — I am a dead man."

As one, the gaggle of villager whirl and pelt away through the underbrush. The falconer smiles a lean smile, stands looking up at the sky where the white bird circles on a rising current of air.

XI

Grayle had covered twelve miles in less than an hour, running steadily across the dark, rain-swept fields, ignoring the pain pain from his side. Now, in the ground below the high rampart of the hills, he found his progress slowed. It was necessary to pick his way, splashing through rushing torrents of muddy water flowing down over the barrier of boulders deposited ten thousand years ago by the glacier. Once he paused, listening to the sound of what seemed to be heavy gunfire in the distance, but the sound was not repeated. Minutes later, he became aware of men moving on the slope ahead and to his left. The ground was steep here, a rubble-heap of rock fallen from the steep cliffs above; the men were noisy, calling to each other, occasionally flashing hand-lights across the slope, through the scrub pines that had found a foothold here. It was apparent that they were soldiers. A sergeant barked angry orders for silence to the members of the Third Platoon.

Grayle skirted the men, who were working their way southward, to his left, and continued his climb, facing into the driving rain.

He was close now. It would not be much longer before he knew if he had been in time.

Outside the unceasing storm buffeted the thick walls; inside, the generator chugged, the stink of exhaust fumes hung in the stale air. Hardman lay on a field cot set up in his office, his right leg heavily bandaged.

"You look bad, Governor," Brasher said, frowning. "You ought to be — "

"Skip all that. Let's have that report."

"Well — if you think you're competent — that is, feeling well enough — "

"The report, Brasher." Hardman's voice was tight with pain. "You like to deliver reports, remember? It gives you a chance to sound like Moses — or is it God in person?"

"Look here — " Brasher started angrily.

"That's an order, Captain!" Hardman's snarl overrode the other.

Brasher's face twitched angrily. "I was thinking of your welfare,

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Governor. However, as you insist," he hurried on. "You know about the car theft and assault in Brooksville. Well, that was just a warmup, it seems. Our man proceeded to Gainesville, attacked two patrolmen and stole their car, drove it to the downtown police helicopter facility, and proceeded to hijack a high-speed military recon machine."

"Who told you this cock-and-bull story?" Hardman cut in.

"Captain Lacey. And — "

"All right. He drove into the middle of a heavily manned police installation, borrowed a copter and took off in a hurricane. Anything else?"

"The copter was followed on radar; it headed northwest. The plot was passed to Eglin, and on to other bases along the route. They tracked him to within a hundred miles of the Canadian border. Then someone — Washington, I think — scrambled fighters out of Great Lakes. They forced him down in rough country in northern Minnesota."

"You're serious about this?"

"Dead serious."

"And where is he now?"

"He got clear. But they got the girl."

"What girl?"

"His accomplice. The one who helped him escape."

"What has she told them?"

Brasher shook his head. "I understand she was pretty badly shaken up in the crash."

"You said he got clear. Weren't they covering the ground?"

"Certainly. But that's a big country."

"He's alone and unarmed, probably injured. He should be easy enough to take."

"Well, as to that — I should point out that there *are* a couple of confusing points. It seems there's a report of a man answering Grayle's description attacking two police officers at the scene of an auto accident."

"Near the crash scene?"

"About seventy miles southwest."

"How does the time tie in?"

"The crash occurred at 4:07. This other item was about an hour later, at 5:01 A.M."

"So now he's in two places at once," Hardman snorted. "What makes you think there's any connection? There are thousands of men who answer Grayle's general description."

"Not that can tear the door off a car," Brasher said, looking sideways at Hardman.

"What does that mean?"

"The FBI looked the car over — the one that was wrecked. It was one of theirs. It was tailing Grayle. The door was ripped from its hinges. And there were fingermarks in the metal."

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Hardman was propped on one elbow. "And?" he prompted.

"He assaulted the police as I said, and left the scene in his car. Twenty miles up the road, he and his accomplice — "

"A girl?"

"No, a man. They hit an Army roadblock, attacked a couple of soldiers, and stole a military vehicle. A halftrack, I think it was."

"All this, less than an hour after he crashed a stolen police copter in another place, accompanied by a woman. Quite a trick, eh, Brasher? A real superman, this fellow — either that, or the police forces of this country are a collection of idiots!"

"I know it sounds crazy." Brasher waved his hands. "But these are the facts reported to me! This man gets around faster than a dirty rumor! It has to be Grayle! Sure, anybody could have grey hair and a red stubble, but who else could tear steel with his bare hands? Unless — " Brasher looked startled.

A minute ago you said something about a superman, Governor," he said. "What would you say to *two* supermen?"

"I don't know, Brasher."

"Well, I'll be getting along, Governor." Brasher glanced at the big gold strap-watch on his nude wrist. "Things are breaking fast; there'll no doubt be an arrest at any moment."

"Brasher," Hardman called as the policeman turned away. "When they catch him — either or both of him — I want him taken alive."

Brasher looked grave. "Well, now, Governor, as we agreed earlier, we don't want to place any obstacles in the path of law enforcement — "

"I said alive, Brasher!"

"What if this mad dog begins shooting down more police officers? What are they supposed to do? Turn the other cheek?"

"Alive, Brasher," Hardman repeated. "Now get out. And maybe you'd better tell that doctor to call the hospital after all."

Outside, Lester Pale was waiting. He raised his eyebrows.

"Nothing," Brasher said briskly. "He was conscious — just barely. He didn't say anything that made sense."

"No change in the orders? I had the idea — "

"No change," Brasher snapped. "I'm a cop, remember? My job is to catch crooks, that's all."

Halfway up the hill where he had abandoned the halftrack, Falconer lay flat on wet ground among dense-growing brush. From the darkness ahead and to the left came the sounds of a man forcing his way through the growth. Other sounds of passage came from the right, along

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with the occasional gleam of a flashlight. Gradually, the sounds receded as the men passed by, moving diagonally to his course. Falconer rose, gained another fifty feet, then paused, head up, sniffing the air. Cautiously, he advanced, skirting a giant tree. The sharp, metallic odor he had noticed grew rapidly stronger. Then he saw the body.

It was a soldier, sprawled at the base of the big pine, hands outflung, one leg doubled under him. The front of the man's raincoat was shredded; pale skin slashed by deep cuts showed through the rents. Above, the throat was gashed from ear to ear ear, not once but in three parallel wounds. The ground under the man was a gluey soup of blood and muck.

For half a minute, Falconer studied the corpse and the ground around it through narrowed eyes. Then he went on.

Tech Sergeant Duane Pitcher of the Third Platoon was disgusted. For the past hour, ever since they'd left the vehicles on the road below, he'd been stumbling around half frozen in the pouring rain in these damned pitch-black woods, trying to follow orders to make no noise and show no lights, and to keep the men spread out in some kind of skirmish line, and keep 'em moving up toward the position the lieutenant had showed him on the contour map. In this soup he'd be lucky to get within a mile of it. It was bad enough just to climb these damned slippery rocks through this damned slippery mud, but he had to be in twenty places at once because otherwise the eager beavers like Obers would be a hundred yards out in front, and goldbricks like Bloom and Ginty would flake out and wind up back at the trucks, claiming they got lost.

Pitcher saw a dim movement ahead, called, got an answer in a deep-south rumble.

"Okay, hold it up here, Brown. We don't want to run into the Second Platoon coming down."

He moved obliquely across the slope, made contact with two more men.

"Where's Obers?" he asked a two-striper.

"Hell, Sarge, where's anybody in this stuff?"

Pitcher grunted. "Okay, hold the platoon where they're at. Lieutenant Boyd's supposed to make contact on the left before we top the ridge. I got to look for Obers before he walks down and gets a 100mm in his lap."

"What was the firing, Sarge?"

"How do I know?" Pitcher moved up along a faint path through the trees. He had covered seventy yards when he tripped

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over an obstruction at the base of a big pine. Pitcher's training was good. As he stumbled, he swung the carbine from his shoulder, hit the ground and rolled, came to rest in firing position, gun aimed, safety off.

Nothing moved. There was no sound but the howl of wind, the crash of rain. He hadn't liked the feel of what he had stepped on. It was too soft, too yielding. It felt like. . . .

He unclipped the flash at his belt, flicked it in the direction of the tree. It shone on a booted foot. The rest of the man was there, too, lying on his back. It was Obers. Pitcher held the light on the torn throat, the lacerated chest.

For a long moment he held the light on the dead man. Then he shifted the beam, shone it around him into the high darkness of the forest. There was nothing but wet trees, wet rock. Then a sound came from his elbow: the snap of a sodden twig, the slither of shoes in mud, the scrape of leather against rock. Pitcher switched off the light, dropped it, fitted the stock of the carbine against his cheek, his finger on the trigger.

A man appeared, toiling upward through the trees. He was a big fellow, dressed in a waterproof mackinaw. Wet black hair was plastered to his round skull. He was headed straight for the spot where the body lay. Pitcher put the light square in his eyes.

"All right, hold it right there!" Pitcher called. At the words, the man froze, then whirled, jumped for the underbrush. Pitcher's finger jerked; red flame gouted. The shot was a flat *bam!* against the background of the storm. The man stumbled, caught himself, plunged on into the brush. Pitcher fired again into the darkness where he had disappeared, but when he came forward to investigate, there was only a foot-print and a splash of fast-dissolving blood to show that there had been a target, and that his bullets had found it.

Falconer had halted when he heard the shots, then, hearing nothing more, resumed his climb. The trail ended on a bare slope of stone across which water sluiced like a spillway. He crossed it, hugging the rock, while the wind drove rain into his eyes and nose, under his clothes. At the upper edge, giant rocks lay tumbled like debris from some gigantic explosion. Falconer picked his way up through them, and was looking down into a hollow, pooled with darkness like ink. He took a step forward, and abruptly there was no rain; the buffeting wind was gone. A foot away the storm still shrieked, but here the air was still warm. There was a soft

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sound from below; a vertical line of yellow light appeared and widened, shining out on dry rock, reflecting on a sleek curve of age-blackened metal. Beyond the open doorway gleamed pale green walls, polished brightwork.

"Welcome, Commander Lokrien," a mellow voice rang out in a strange language that for a moment Falconer almost failed to comprehend. "I have waited long for this hour."

Standing in the road beside the medium tank which, half an hour before, had fired three rounds of conventional 100mm through the main entrance to the Upper Pasmaquoddie Power Plant, Colonel Ajax Pyler propped his fists on his hips and thrust his face closer to that of the Divisional Staff Observer.

"You don't know the situation, Yount!" he snapped. "I saw it kill a man right in front of me! I talked to the three men that managed to get clear! I'm telling you this is more than a malfunction or a damn fool plot by a crazy engineer!"

"There are some forty civilian personnel still inside that building, Pyler," Colonel Yount came back coolly. "We have only the word of a couple of half-hysterical civilians that there's anything wrong in there that a platoon of foot-soldiers can't control."

"I'm not sending a man of my command into that death-trap," Pyler said flatly. "I don't give a damn if the commanding general personally wrote out the order in his own blood with a bent pen!"

"Pyler, you're trigger-happy."

"My orders were to shut down that transmitter. I intend to do just that — any way I can!"

"That's a five billion dollar Federal installation you're shelling man! This isn't Vietnam. You can't just blow anything that gets in your way to kingdom come!"

"I can try!"

"Before you do," Yount said coldly, "I suggest you think for a few moments about trying less drastic measures than total destruction of the plant."

"Who said anything about total destruction? I intend to place rounds in carefully selected spots, as pointed out by my engineers, until transmission ceases. Then—"

"No, you're not, Pyler." Yount made a swift motion. The big master sergeant who had been standing by at parade rest staring straight out under the rim of his steel helmet came to life.

"Colonel Pyler, this is Sergeant Major Muldoon. He weighs two hundred and forty pounds, stripped, and there's not an ounce of fat on him. I've ordered him to escort you back to divisional HQ to make your report."

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Pyler's face went pale, then purpled.

"That is, unless you're willing to listen to reason."

Pyler drew a couple of hoarse breaths through his nose.

"What . . . what do you have in mind?"

"I want to send a three-man team into the plant. Specially equipped, of course; I'm not completely discounting your description of conditions inside. It seems there are several points at which the circuitry can be interrupted quite simply."

"I told you what happened to that Engineer fellow, Hunnicut, and the other man. And before them there was another — "

"I know all about that. I've talked to Prescott. My men know what to do."

"Very well," Pyler said through stiff lips. "I'll want written orders relieving me, of course."

Yount shook his head. "You're not relieved, Jack. I'm just lending what you might call a little tech support from headquarters." He turned away, began giving instructions to a tall, blond-haired captain and two noncoms, all in black commando assault dress.

Lieutenant Harmon of the Florida State Police was the first to spy the abandoned halftrack, blocking the gullied trail above. He and Captain Zwicky climbed down from their machines, slogged forward, guns in hand.

"Well, what did you expect, to find your man sitting in it eating his lunch?" Zwicky asked as Harmon cursed the empty vehicle.

"The son of a bitch can't be far. Let's get him!"

Zwicky squinted up through swirling rain at the dark forest above. "You think you could find him up there?"

"Got any better ideas?"

"Maybe." Zwicky indicated the low rise to the east. "The Passamaquoddie Power Plant's just the other side of the hill a couple of miles. Maybe that's where he was headed."

"What the hell would he want to go there for?"

"I don't know, but there's some kind of trouble over there. That's why the Army's out in the weather. Maybe your man has something to do with it."

"Like what? For Christ's sake, Captain, this bum is a con on the lam, a lousy killer who spent his life in stir. What — "

"I don't know. But this is the only inhabited spot in forty miles; this is wild country, Lieutenant. And your man headed right for it. It's worth looking into, isn't it? Or are you dead set on climbing up there to beat the bushes for him — alone? Because this is as far as I go."

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Harmon looked up toward the heights above.

"Well — "

There was a sound from nearby — the unmistakable double *clack-clack!* of the arming lever of a rifle.

"Freeze right there!" the harsh voice barked from the darkness.

Harmon dropped his pistol, hoisted his hands where he stood, his back to the voice. Zwicky turned slowly, holding the carbine by the breech, muzzle down, out from his side.

A uniformed man came forward, holding a carbine leveled. There were tech sergeant's stripes painted on the helmet that concealed his eyes.

"What is this, Sergeant?" Zwicky said.

"Hey!" another voice spoke up. "The guy's an officer, for Chrissakes!"

The sergeant paused, looking uncertainly from Zwicky to Harmon, who was looking back over his shoulder. The latter lowered his hands.

"GI's!" he blurted. "For God's sake, Zwicky, tell them!"

"Get 'em up — high!" the noncom snapped. "You, too, Cap'n."

"Maybe you'd better tell me just what the hell you think you are doing," Zwicky said, not moving.

"Maybe you'd better drop it, Cap'n, before I pull this trigger. I've lost one man tonight, and I'm not messing around."

Zwicky let the gun fall. "All right, tell it, soldier."

"You better tell me what you are doing in my platoon area, Cap'n. And who's this fellow?" He jerked his head at Harmon.

"He's a police officer. We're looking for the man who drove the track up here." Zwicky motioned with his head toward the big vehicle behind him.

"Gus, take a look at their ID's. Don't get between me and them."

A corporal came forward, slung his carbine, grinned sheepishly as he patted Zwicky's pockets, brought out his wallet, opened it and showed the blue card to the sergeant, who studied it by the light of the flash another man held. The corporal took Harmon's badge, showed it to the other.

"All right, I've played along with you, Sergeant," Zwickey said as he pocketed his wallet. "Now aim that piece in some other direction and tell me what the hell is going on here."

The sergeant lowered the carbine reluctantly. "One o' my men's dead up there. Obers, worth any other three men in the outfit. I'm looking for the man that did it." He glanced at the track. "Maybe — "

"Sure it's him!" Harmon burst out. "The man's a cold-blooded

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killer, an escaped convict!" He looked at Zwicky. "I told you about this boy, Captain. Now maybe you'll listen to me!"

"Let's take a look," Zwicky said. He picked up his carbine, wiped mud from it on his sleeve. Harmon scooped up his pistol.

"Gus, you take the point," the sergeant ordered the corporal. "Cap'n, you and the civilian next. I'll be right behind."

It took the group a quarter of an hour to pick their way upslope to the spot where Ober's body lay. Harmon whistled as he stared down at the mutilated corpse.

"Okay," he said. "Now you see what kind of guy we're working with. Kid gloves, hah? Like hell, Captain; like hell."

"There's some kind of trail leading up here," one of the men said. "Hey!" He pointed excitedly to a sheltered spot under a clump of foliage. "Footprints — a couple of 'em!"

"Sure, I seen the bastard," the sergeant said. "I winged him, but he got clear. When I heard noises down below, I figured maybe he'd double back."

Harmon grunted. "He's up there," he said. "And I say let's get him."

The sergeant looked at Harmon. "You're a cop," he said. "If I go up there, I aim to shoot first and chin with the son of a bitch later."

"Can't say I blame you," Harmon said.

"Gus, you take the detail," the sergeant said. "I'll be back when I've cleared my barrel into somebody's gut."

With Zwicky in the lead, the three men started up the final ascent.

It is dusk. Against the dust-red sky, the flashes of the besieging cannon wink ceaselessly across the folds of the hills below the walls of the town. From the gates, a party of five men ride out on war horses, gaunt black steeds whose ribs stand out like the cheekbones of their helmeted and corseleted riders, one of whom carries a couched lance from the hip of which a white pennon flutters. Four of the men are olive-dark, blackbearded. One is smooth-shaven, with black-red hair and a scarred face. He sits a head taller in the saddle than any of his companions, and rides before them.

Another party of five men sit their horses on the brow of the slope. These men are better fed; one has black hair and a cat's eyes. One, with hair the color of new rust, sits in advance of the others, dressed in rich but well-worn war-gear, a sword at his side, a shield slung at his saddle-bow.

The oncoming party halts fifty

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feet distant. The leader speaks briefly to his men, swings down from his mount, comes forward. The rust-haired man dismounts, advances to meet him. They are of a height, one wider, thicker of wrist and neck, the other quicker-moving, lighter-footed.

"I knew it was you," the big-boned man says. "I saw your cursed fowl coursing above the field."

"Yet you came."

"Have no fear. I honor the white ensign."

The flame-haired man laughs softly.

"Many loyal men starve in the town," the bigger man says. "This charade must end."

"Then cease your harrassment of my merchants."

"Let them peddle their wares at home! These people have no need of better steel and improved gunpowder. They do slaughter enough with their own crude means."

"I regret the uses to which knowledge is put. But that is the price of a growing technology."

"The price is too high! These barbarians are not ready."

"I've told you my terms, de la Torre — as I believe you style yourself these days."

"Because of those who trust me, I must yield. But we will meet again, brother."

"No doubt, brother."

They turn, each rejoins his own men. De la Torre's chief lieutenant eyes the flame-haired man as he mounts his white horse.

"My lord, why not kill him now? A swift shaft in the back—"

His master catches him by the arm, lifts him to his toes.

"He is mine, Castillo. Mine and no other's!"

Across the hill, the cat-eyed man rides close beside his lord.

"Surely it would have been wise to dispatch the traitor on the spot," he is saying. "A single prick of a poisoned dart — "

"No."

"But, lord! Doubtless he plots new betrayal."

"You lie, Pinquelle!"

"I sometimes wonder, lord, whether truly it be hate — or love — that you feel for him."

The master reins in, wheels to face his lackey. "Get thee gone from my company, Pinquelle! I tire of thy pinched face and thy cruel eyes and thy poisonous tongue."

"As my lord wishes." The man turns his mount and rides away, not looking back.

XII

Captain Aldous Drake, Special Forces, on detached duty with HQ, Third Army, lay flat on his belly in sodden grass a hundred and thirty feet from the fire-blackened orifice that had

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been the glass-and-aluminum main entrance to the power plant. A typist's chair lay on its side among the rubble half blocking the entry. A strip of tattered scarlet carpet was draped over the littered porch and down the steps, like the tongue of a dead animal. Smoke still drifted from the blackened interior of the entry hall.

"Pyler messed up the front door pretty bad," Staff Sergeant Ike Weintraub said, hugging the ground a few feet to Drake's left.

"That's okay. We don't plan to waltz in their anyway. Ike, there's your spot, off to the left, past the bushes." Drake indicated a vertical ventilator slot cutting the featureless concrete front. "A few ounces of PMM ought to open a hole wide enough to slide in through. Jess!" He addressed the big black-faced three-striper on his right. "Think you can get up on the roof — over there to the right, above the terrace?"

"Sure, no sweat."

"When you get up there, keep low, look for the freight elevator shaft. You know how to jimmy it." Drake looked at his watch.

"I make it five minutes and thirty seconds after." He waited while the other two made minute adjustments to their timepieces. "Ike, I'm giving you five minutes to set your charges. Jess, you have your spot picked. Use your power jimmy, but no blasting. I may break a little glass getting in. We'll spread out inside — you know the layout from the maps— and each go for his own target. First man to score sets off a screamer and we get the hell out. All right, let's go."

"Cap'n. When we break away, will it be a category three, or what?"

"Category one, Ike. Every man for himself. Our reports may make all the difference to the next team. But I'm betting both you bums a fifth of the good stuff we all make it clean. Let's go." Drake slid forward, using his elbows and toes in a quick, comical rhythm that ate up the distance with deceptive swiftness and in total silence. For a few seconds he could see his two compatriots as dark blurs against darkness; then they were gone.

Ahead the building waited, high, bright-lit, crossed by slanting lines of rain. Fifty feet from the facade, Drake encountered bits of debris: glass, brick fragments, a scrap of upholstery material, papers. He crossed a sidewalk, another strip of grass, eased under a line of low-growing juniper, and was against the face of the building.

The windows — fixed double panels of heavy plastic — were just above him, the sills at face level, the room behind them dark.

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Drake came to his feet to the left of the opening, opened a pouch clipped to his pistol belt, took out a lump of a dark green material resembling modeling clay. He formed it swiftly into a long, slender tube, packed it along the edge of the glass, working two feet out from the corner along the bottom and side. He inserted a tiny glass-encased capsule in the corner, attached a pair of hair-fine wires and withdrew along the face of the building a distance of ten feet. He went flat, face down, and brought his wristwatch up under his eyes. Three and a half minutes elapsed. Ninety seconds to go.

The rain pounded Drake's back. The cold mud under his chest soaked through his combat jacket, found chinks in his weather suit. He flexed his hands to keep them limber. Never tell what you might run into inside. Yount had talked as if the whole thing was an exercise, but the other bird — Pyler, his name was — had been pretty shook up. Too bad he hadn't had a chance to talk to the men who'd come out of the plant, but Yount had passed on everything useful — or so he said. Not that it amounted to much. But for what it was worth, the pattern looked simple. The corridors were electrified, the switches, door hardware, everything you'd normally touch. So the trick was to make your own holes, stick to the service ways, go straight for the spot the tech boys had shown him on the drawings, and zap! The job was done. After all, it was just a pile of machinery in there. Pull the plug and it had to quit, it was as easy as that.

Ten seconds to go. Drake hoped Ike was ready, and that Jess had his spot picked. If there *was* some inside, some mad genius type, hitting him in three places at once ought to keep him hopping. Five seconds. Too bad if he wasn't quite close enough to the building and a pound or two of pulverized plexiglas hit him in the back.

Drake thumbed the detonator button. There was an instantaneous ear-shattering blast, and dirt gouted beside his face. He came to his feet, slid along the wall to the now glassless opening, reached in for a grip, jumped, pulled himself up over the sill and dropped onto a glass-littered carpet. He rolled to the wall, stopped with his feet spread, toes out, elbow braced, the pistol in his hand aimed toward the door. Dust was still settling. A piece of glass fell softly to the rug. A corpse lay face down near the desk. All right, Drake thought. Where's Ike's shot?

He felt the dull blast through the floor before the sound came.

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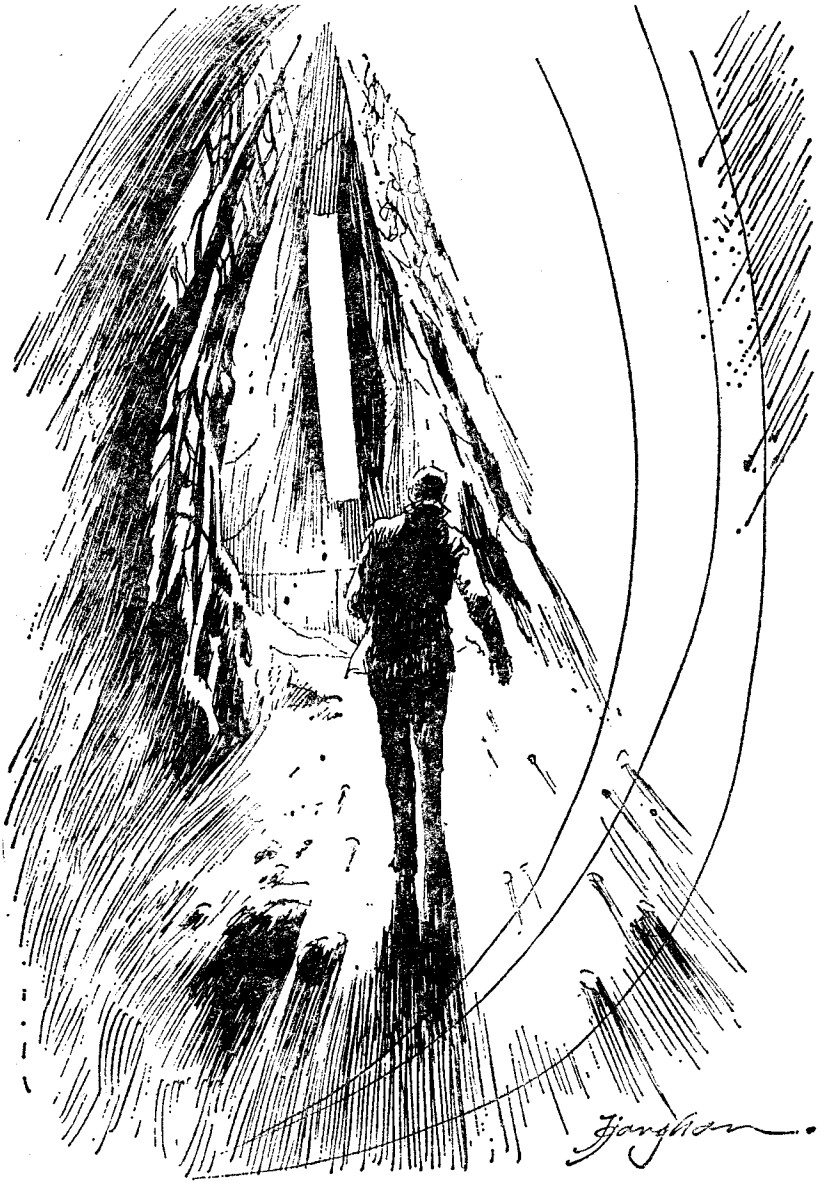

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Drake let out a breath and looked around the room. The entry to the access system the engineers had pointed out was in the ceiling of the toilet opening onto the office. The door was six feet away, standing ajar. Drake stood; as he did, he noticed a pale light glowing against the rug. A corridor light shining under the door, hitting the rug fibers? No, too bright for that. More of a fluorescence — and getting brighter, rippling like the glow in hot embers. A spark leaped across the rug. Drake backed a step; his elbow touched a filing cabinet.

In the next instant blue fire enveloped him. He had time to draw one breath — a breath of flames that scorched his lungs — and to expell it in a ragged screech of agony. Then his charred body fell stiffly, lay smoking on the floor, the half-slagged pistol still gripped in his blackened finger bones.

Sixty feet distant, in the ground floor mechanical equipment room, Ike Weintraub paused in wrapping a field bandage around the gash he had received on his forearm from a wild fragment from his shot, his head cocked. The sound had been very faint, but it had sounded a lot like a yell — a scream, to be exact. But it was probably just wind whistling around some of the holes they had knocked in the walls. He felt kind of embarrassed, being five seconds late on the blast. Drake was right on the button. Sharp character, old Drake. If all the brass were like him, a man would not mind throwing a few salutes. Too bad the Army hadn't been what he'd dreamed it would be: good men, trained fine, ready to face anything together, one for all and all for one, or whatever the old saying was. Corny, maybe, but it was still the best thing in the world, to be with the ones you knew you could count on. Funny, back home he'd believed all that crap he'd been brought up on, about how much better he was than the *goyim*, had thought a black man was one notch above a gorilla. That was one thing about the Army. He'd found out that when the going got rough, it wasn't the religion or the hide that counted, it was the stuff inside. Like Drake. Drake was the best. And old Jess. They didn't make 'em any better. He'd go all the way to Hell with those two—like now. He didn't like this job, not anything about it. Those civilians were no dumbells, and they were scared all the way through. And Pyler, too. He was a bastard, but nobody had even said he was yellow. But it was okay being here, knowing what to do, how to do it, knowing Jess was in it with him,

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that Drake was running the show. It was okay. And it was time to get moving.

Weintraub flashed his needle-light around the big room, spotted the ladder against the wall behind the big sheet-metal duct, the trapdoor above it, right where they'd said. So far so good. All he had to do now was skin up there and get into the crawl space, and head for the target.

But still he hesitated. It looked too easy. It was what the double-domes that worked in the place had figured out — but they hadn't done so hot when *they'd* been on the inside. Got their tails burned off. So maybe it might be a smart idea to take two looks at the layout before he jumped.

Weintraub worked the light over the walls, ceiling, and floor. He got to his feet, moved along the wall, not touching it. The back of the big air-handlers looked about the same as the front. There was a wooden ladder clamped against the rear wall, in a narrow space behind a big condenser. A square grill was set in the wall above it. There was nothing about it that looked any better than the other route, but Weintraub liked it better somehow. He lifted the ladder down, propped it against the wall, climbed it until he was facing the plastic grill. There were two plastic knobs holding it. He loosened them, swung the grill aside and was looking into a dusty lift. Using his elbows, he pulled himself up and in. The light showed him a wide, low room, crammed full of ducting, conduits, cables, pipes. He didn't like the look of all that gear, but there wasn't much he could do about it. He knew which way to go. He started off, picking his way carefully over, under and through the obstructions.

Ten minutes later, following his mental image of the diagrams he had studied for a full five minutes before starting out, he had reached the spot Drake had picked for him — he hoped.

If he was on target, there would be a black pipe here as big as his leg. According to the civilians, it was some kind of tube conduit. When he blew it, it would shut down the high-pressure sliicone supply to the generator bearing, and in about three minutes they'd overheat and kick in a set of automatic breakers. Anyway, that was the theory. It was plenty noisy here. That was a good sign. The manifold room was supposed to be right below him. And there was the pipe. He shone the light along the glazed black surface. The junction where it made a right-angle bend down looked like the spot to hit. Weintraub placed the light so as to shine on the angle and extracted the shaped

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charge from the pouch over his right hip. From another pocket he took the detonator, a tiny capsule half an inch long. He handled it with exaggerated care. The big charge would blow a hole through a concrete wall, but it stood a lot of handling. The cap, on the other hand, was as delicate as a cracked egg. One little slip, and blam!

He cut off that line of thought. Keep your mind on business, that was the secret. A guy who broke down and ran was just a guy who thought too much about the wrong things. He'd either finish the job and get out alive, or he wouldn't. If he didn't, he'd never know what hit him. So why worry? Smiling slightly, Ike Weintraub shifted position to get at the miniature tools clipped to his belt. His head struck a pipe passing low above him.

It was not a hard blow, not really enough to daze him. But it was enough to jar the detonator cap from his fingers. It fell fourteen inches to the concrete floor and exploded with a force that shattered Weintraub's lower jaw and drove a sizable section of jagged bone into his jugular vein.

It was twenty-one seconds before his heart, having pumped the body's blood supply out through the immense wound, sucked convulsively on air, went into fibrillation and stopped.

In the crawl space above the switch room, big Jess Dooley heard the sharp report. He frowned, waiting for the howl of the screamer that would mean Drake or Ike had scored. But nothing came.

It figured. The bang hadn't been loud enough to be a working charge. Which left the question of what it *had* been. But that was a question that would have to wait. A category one operation. Drake had said. That meant get the job done and ask questions later, at the corner table in the bar where the three of them did their serious drinking. Funny world. Couldn't get together in the NCO Club; Drake wasn't allowed. Same for the Officers' Club, no Em's wanted. Same for most of the joints off-base. A black hide netted no smiles in the Main Street spots, and he'd have to whip half the draft-dodgers in darktown if he took a couple of Pinks down there. Yep, funny world. It was better here, with death crackling in the air all around him, doing the thing he knew how to do, with the men he knew he could count on to back his play, no matter what. Jess wiped sweat from his forehead with a thick finger and, using his pinpoint light, began studying the maze of conduits sprouting from the big panel on the wall, looking for the two that

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carried the wires to the thermostats that controlled the fuel supply to the nuclear generators buried a hundred feet below the station.

Falconer moved down from the boulder-strewn rim of the hollow, his eyes on the open, lighted doorway, and on the slim shape soaring into darkness above.

"I searched for you, Xix," he said, in the old language that came haltingly to him. "I thought you'd lifted long ago, without me."

"I have never abandoned you, my commander," the voice called over the drum of rain. "So long as the Other knew my location, I would never be safe from him in my weakened condition. It was necessary that I conceal myself. But nine hours ago the natives erected a crude energy field on which I was able to draw for minimal functions. At once I sent out my call to you, my commander. We must act swiftly now."

Falconer laughed softly. "After all this time, Xix? What's your hurry?"

"Commander, the energy field is feeble, not matched to my receptors. I draw but a trickle of power from it, insufficient to charge my static energy coil. If I am to lift from this planet I require more power. Much more."

"How long will it take to draw enough from the broadcast field?"

"Over a century. We cannot wait. We must charge the coil directly from the source, unattenuated by distance."

"How?"

"With your assistance, my commander. You must remove the lift coil, take it to the transmitting station and tap the beam directly."

"It occurs to me that we're very close to the transmitter. That must have been the installation I saw, on the way here. Rather a coincidence, eh, Xix?"

"Indeed, commander. But the coil must be charged and time is short. Already I have been forced to. . . . But no matter. You must remove the coil and descend at once to the transmitter."

"I heard firing down there. What's going on, Xix?"

"An effort was made to shut down the transmission. Of course I cannot permit that."

"How can you stop it?"

"My commander, we must not delay now the discussion of peripheral matters. I sense that I am threatened; the hour for action has come."

Falconer crossed the rock-strewn ground, aware of the thunder and roll of the storm, beyond the protected area sealed off by the ship's defensive field. He stepped up through the entry port,

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went along the dustless passage walled with smooth synthetic, ornamented with fittings of imperishable metal. In the control compartment, soft lights glowed across the banked dials and levers, so once-familiar, so long forgotten.

"Xix. What about Gralgrathor? If he's still alive — "

"The traitor is dead."

"So many years," he said. "I don't feel any hate any longer." He laughed, not a jolly laugh. "I don't feel much of anything now."

"Soon you will, my commander. The long twilight ends. Ysar waits for us."

"Yes," Falconer said. "Now I'd better get busy. It's been a long time since I put a tool to a machine of Ysar."

John Zabisky, wounded in the lower right side by a steel-jacketed 30 calibre slug which had broken a rib, punctured a lung, traversed his liver and lodged in the inner curve of the ilium, lay on his face under a dense-needled dwarf pine. Immediately after he had been shot, he had covered fifty feet of rough going in his initial plunge away from danger. Then the shock had overtaken him and dropped him on his face. For a while then — he had no idea how long — he had lain, dazed, feeling the hot, spreading ache in his side grow into a throbbing agony that swelled inside him like a ravenous animal feeding on his guts. Then the semi-euphoric state had given way to full consciousness. Zabisky explored with his fingers, found the entry sound. It was bleeding, but not excessively. The pain seemed to be somewhere else, deep inside. He was gut-shot.

He knew what that meant. He had an hour, maybe two. A lousy way to go. He lay with his cheek against the mud and thought about it.

Why the hell had he followed the guy, Falconer, after he'd kissed him off? He had his money, two cees. Curiosity? Not exactly that, it was more than just sticking his nose in. It was like the guy needed him. Like he was mixed up in something too tough for him, trying to do it alone, tackling too much for one man. And you wanted to help the guy, stick by him. It was like there was something at stake, something you couldn't put in words; but if you finked out, let it slide, washed your hands of it, you'd never be able to see yourself again as the man you thought you were. It was like in the old days, kind of, when the first John Sobieski had climbed on his horse and led his men into battle. It was a thing you had to do, or admit you were nothing.

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Yeah. And then the light had hit him in the face, and then some guy yells, and then the ballbat hit him in the side, and he heard the gun firing after him, and then he was here, and what good were the two cees now?

And where the hell was here? Halfway up some lousy hill, in the woods, in the middle of the night, in a storm like you didn't see twice in one lifetime.

Especially not his lifetime. Maybe another hour. Maybe not that much.

Falconer would help him, if he knew.

Falconer was up ahead someplace.

Got to get moving.

Painfully, grunting, fighting back the nausea and the weakness, Zabisky pulled himself forward another foot. He had covered perhaps a hundred yards when he saw the glow above. That would be Falconer up there. Probably had a cabin up there, a warm room, a fire, a bed. Better to die in a bed than here. Better to die just trying for it than to stop here and let the pain wash up and up until it covered you and you sank down in it and were like all the other extinct animals you saw in books. Not much you could do then about anything. But it hadn't come to that yet.

Not much you could do when you were in the pink. But you had to make do with what you could. He still had a few yards left in him. Take 'em one at a time, that was the trick. One at a time . . . as long as time held out.

He had covered another half dozen yards when he heard the sound above: a faint clatter of dislodged pebble.

"Falconer," he called peering upward. There was a movement there, among the shadows. A long, high-shouldered, narrow shape flowed into view, stood looking down with yellow eyes that seemed to blaze like tiny fires against the blackness.

Two hundred yards to the east and a hundred feet below, Grayle worked his way along the face of a weathered fissure in the rock. Three times he had attempted to gain the ledge above; three times he had fallen back. The distance was too great, the scant handholds too slippery, the broken ribs still too crippling. Now he descended to the talus slope below, angling to the south, skirting the barrier. The grade was less precipitate here. Stunted trees had found footholds; brush and exposed roots offered grips for his hands. He made more rapid progress, moving laterally into bigger timber. Striking a faint path, he turned right along it, resumed his ascent. He had covered only a few yards when he saw

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the body lying at the base of the pine.

For long seconds he stood staring down at the ripped throat of the dead man. Then he made an animal noise deep in his throat, shook himself like a man waking from a nightmare, and started upward.

He had covered a hundred yards when he heard sounds ahead: the grate of feet on stone, the puffing of labored breath. More than one man, making clumsy progress upward.

He left the path and hurried to overtake them.

Lying flat on his back in utter darkness, Sergeant Jess Dooley felt the miniature power hacksaw cut through the second of the two conduits. It had been a delicate operation, cutting all the way around each of the half-inch stainless steel tubes without touching the wires inside, but the engineers had made it pretty plain what would happen if a man shorted them accidentally.

Now the trick was to short them on purpose and get away in one piece. Dooley wiped sweat on his forearm and thought about the layout he had studied on paper. Memory was important to a man in his line of work. You had to have a natural mnemonic aptitude, and then survive some tough training to qualify as a member of a Special Team. After all the trouble of getting to where the job was, there were plenty of times when completing it depended on perfect recall of a complicated diagram.

Like now. It wouldn't do to just cut a wire. There were six back-up systems that would take over in that case — even if he wasn't fried in the process. He had to tinker the thing to give a false reading — and not too false at that. Just enough to show a no-demand condition, and make the automatic cut-outs lock in. These automated layouts were pretty smart: they could deal with just about any situation that came up. But you could fool 'em. They did not expect to get a phoney signal from their own guts.

And if he could attach the little gadget the technical boys had handed him at just the right spot, in just the right way — between sensors, and if possible at the same instant as a legitimate impulse from the thermostats. . . .

Well, then, he might get away with it.

He extracted the device — the size of a worm pill for a medium-sized dog — removed the protective tubing from the contacts. He shifted position, settling himself so he could make one smooth co-ordinated motion. The protective devices wouldn't like it if he fumbled the hookon, making and

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breaking contact half a dozen times in half a second before he got the ringer in position.

He was ready. Sweat was running down into his eyes. He wiped at it ineffectively with his shoulder. Hot in here, no air. A man could suffocate before he got the job done. So what was he waiting for? Nothing. He was ready. The next time the relay clicked — it cycled about once every five minutes — he'd make his move.

Captain Zwicky, a few feet in advance of Sergeant Pitcher and Harmon, pulled himself up over an outcropping of granite and started to rise to his feet.

"That's far enough, Captain," a deep voice said from above. "This is no place for you tonight. Go back."

Zwicky remained frozen, both hands and one knee on the ground, an expression of total astonishment on his upturned face. Behind him, Pitcher, hearing the sudden voice, halted, then eased forward. Over the captain's shoulder he could see dark underbrush dripping foliage — and the legs and torso of a man. A big man, in dark clothes.

In a single motion, he raised the carbine, sighted and fired. At the explosion beside his right ear, Zwicky plunged forward and sideways. Pitcher, his path cleared, scrambled up, saw the tall, dark-shadowed figure still standing in the same position; hastily he brought the carbine up — and felt a ringing shock against his hands as the gun flew from his grip. He made a lunge in the direction the weapon had skidded, felt hard hands catch him, lift him, turn him. Zwicky was on his feet, raising his carbine; but he was having trouble finding a clear shot. Pitcher felt himself swung forward, released. He crashed downward through twenty feet of brush before he came up hard against a tree. As he struggled up, Lieutenant Harmon grabbed his arm, dragged him to his feet.

"What happened up there? That shot — "

"Leggo," Pitcher blurted. He chopped at Harmon's hand, grabbed for the other's pistol. "Gimme that!"

"You nuts?"

The arrival of Captain Zwicky, sliding and tumbling down the trail, cut off his protest. Pitcher stepped back, holding the pistol, as Zwicky came to rest on his back between the two men.

"Stand fast, Sergeant!" he blurted as Pitcher started past him.

"I'm getting the bastard that killed Obers," Pitcher snarled.

"That's an order!" Pitcher halted as Zwicky crawled to his feet. His nose was bleeding and he had lost his cap. He wiped at his

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face with the back of his hand, smearing blood which ran down, mingling with rainwater.

"Losing more men won't help anything," he said. "I don't know what we're up against, but it's more than it looks like. Before we try it again, we have to — "

At that moment, a sound cut through the crash of the storm: a strident, wailing scream that ran down the scale and died in a groan of horror.

Without a word, Harmon whirled and plunged down the path. Pitcher backed two steps, was jabbed between the shoulder blades by the stub of a dead branch. He dropped his carbine, dived down the slope head-first. Zwicky hesitated for a moment, started to shout a command, then turned and went down the path, not running, but wasting no time.

"What in the Nine Hells was that?" Falconer rose from the open panel behind which the compact bulk of the drained energy coil was mounted.

"Don't be alarmed,'" the cool voice of the ship said. "It is merely a warning device. I arranged to keep the native life in all its forms at a distance."

"It sounded like a hunting *krill*. By the king of all devils, I'd forgotten that sound."

"It serves its purpose most effectively."

"What set it off just now?"

"A native was prowling nearby."

"A strange time and place to be prowling."

"Have no fear. Now that my Y field is restored, I am safe from their petty mischief."

"I may have led them here," Falconer said. "It's too bad. There's likely to be trouble when I start back down."

"There are weapons in my armory, Commander — "

"I have no desire to murder anyone, Xix," Falconer said. "These are people too. This is their world."

"Commander, you are as far above these natives as — but I distract you from your task. Their presence nearby indicates the need for haste."

In silence, Falconer resumed the disassembly of the lift unit.

For a moment after the cry of the hunting *krill* sounded, Grayle stood staring upward into the darkness of the rim beyond which faint light gleamed on the slanting curtain of rain. There was no further sound. He resumed his climb, crossed a slope of naked rock, made his way up over a jumble of granite and was looking across a pebble-strewn ledge at the soft glowing Ul-metal hull of a fleet boat of the Ysarian Navy upreared among the rock slabs.

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Jess Dooley heard the soft click of the relay as it opened. He had precisely point four seconds to move. In a smooth motion he touched the two wires of the false-signal device to the exposed conductors.

A spark jumped to the exposed end of the cut-through conduit, from which a volatile anti-static and coolant fluid was draining. The flash of fire seared the hair from the left side of Dooley's scalp, charred the edge of his ear, scorched deep into the exposed skin of his neck. In an instant reflex, the man snatched a tiny-high-pressure can from his belt, directed a billow of smothering foam at himself, at the pool of fluid over which pale blue flames leaped like burning brandy on a fruitcake, over the conduits and cables around him. He moved backward, awkward under the low ceiling, holding his breath to exclude the mixture of flame, foam and noxious gases.

The flames winked and dimmed. Then the pain hit. Dooley dropped the can, groped for another, gave himself a liberal dose of nerve paralysant. The burned side of his face went wooden. Too late, he turned his head. A drop of condensed painkiller trickled into the corner of his right eye. There was a momentary stinging; then numbness, darkness.

Swearing to himself, Dooley found his needle-light, switched it on. Nothing. The light was hot against his hand. It was working, all right. But he couldn't see it. With nerve-deadener in both eyes, he was blind as a bat.

Nice work, Dooley. Nice spot. Is the fire out? Hope so. Is the little magic combination can-opener and disaster-averter in place and functioning? Hope that too. Meanwhile, how does a man go about getting the hell out of here?

Alone, in darkness, Dooley began inching his way back along the route he had come.

In the glow of the campfire, the faces of the men are ruddy, belying the privations of the long campaign. They sit in silence, listening to the shrill cicadas, the soft sounds of the river, looking across at the scattered lights of Vicksburg.

An orderly approaches, a boy scarcely out of his teens, thin and awkward in his dusty blue uniform. He halts before a broad-shouldered officer with shoulder-length hair, once red, now shot with gray.

"General Logan, Major Tate's compliments, sir, and they took a rebel colonel half an hour ago scouting this side the river, and would the general like to talk to him."

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The big man rises. "All right, lad." He follows the boy along the crooked path among the pitched tents where men in rumpled blue sit listlessly, oppressed by the humid heat and the swarming insects. At a rough compound built of boards wrenched from the walls of a nearby barn, a slouching sentry straightens as they approach, presents arms. A captain emerges from a tent, salutes, speaks to an armed sergeant. A detail of four men fall in beside them. The gate is opened.

"A five-man escort?" General Logan says mildly as they enter the compound. "He must be a redoubtable warrior indeed."

The captain has a round red face, a long, straggly mustache. He wipes sweat from his face, nods.

"A hard case. Cripps swears he broke a half-inch rope they had on him. I guess if he hadn't been out cold when they found him, they wouldn't have got the rope on him in the first place. I'm taking no chances with him."

They halt before a blacksmith's forge, where a bare-headed man waits, trussed with new hemp rope. He is big, broad, with a square, scarred face and black-red hair. There are iron manacles on his wrists. An iron cannonball lies by, in position to be attached to his left ankle. There is blood on his face and on his gray tunic.

General Logan stares at the man. "You," he says in a tone of profound astonishment. The prisoner blinks through the dried blood which has run down into his eyes. Abruptly, he makes a shrugging motion, and the men holding him are thrown back. He tenses, and with a sharp popping sound, the hemp strands break. He reaches, seizes the blacksmith's hammer in his manacled hands, leaps forward, and brings the heavy sledge down with smashing force on the skull of the Union general.

XIII

Carrying the heavy coil, Falconer stood for a moment in the entry, looking out across the circle of dry dust and loose stone soft-lit by the ship's port lights, ending in abrupt transition to the rim of broken, rain-swept rock, and beyond, the tops of black trees rising from below.

"Good luck, commander," Xix said as he stepped down. Burdened by the heavy load, he picked his way across toward the point below which the path led downward. He had descended less than a hundred feet when he saw the man lying face-down in the path, bulky in a bright-colored mackinaw. Falconer dropped the coil,

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knelt by the man's side. There was blood on the side of the heavy coat. He turned the man over, saw the gaping wounds across the side of the thick muscular neck, the shredded front of the sodden jacket.

"John Zabisky," he muttered. "Why did you follow me?"

Zabisky's eyelids stirred, lifted; his small, opal-black eyes looked into Falconer's. His lips moved.

"I . . . tried," he said distinctly; then all the light went out of hsi eyes, left them as dull as stones.

Falconer rose, stood looking down at the rain falling on the face of the dead man. He glanced up at a faint sound and a hard white light struck him in the eyes.

"I should have known you wouldn't die," a deep harsh voice said out of the darkness.

"So you're alive, Gralgrathor," Falconer said.

Grayle came forward, looked at the body on the ground at Falconer's feet. "I see you've had a busy night, Lukrien."

"And more business yet to come. I don't have time to waste, 'Thor. Go your way and I'll go mine. Or you still intent on braining me?"

"I didn't come here to kill you, Lukrien, my business is with *that*." He tilted his head toward the faint glow from above.

"You expect Xix to take you off this world?"

"On the contrary. Xix isn't going anywhere."

"I think he is. Stand aside, 'Thor."

"I didn't come to kill you, Loki," Grayle said. "But I will if you try to interfere." He pointed down the path. "You'll be safe down there."

"We'll go down together."

"You're going down. I'm going up," Grayle said.

Falconer shook his head. "No," he said.

Grayle looked across at him, his square face obscure in the darkness. "When the Y-field went on and I felt the homing pulse, I knew you'd come, if you lived. I hoped to get here ahead of you. It's strange, but over the years the thought had grown in my mind that somehow, in some way, there'd been some fantastic mistake. Then I saw the dead man down below. I knew then I'd find you here."

"I find that remark obscure, 'Thor."

"Have you forgotten I've seen wounds like those before?"

"Indeed? Where, might I ask?"

"You dare to ask me that."

Soft footfalls sounded, coming closer. From the shadows beside the path, a sinuous shape emerged, pacing on padded feet.

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It resembled, more than any other terrestrial creature, a giant black panther: as big as a Bengal tiger; but longer-legged, slimmer, deeper chested, with a rounded skull and bright, alert yellow eyes. It advanced on Grayle, raised a claw-studded paw as big as a dinner plate. . . .

"Stop!" Falconer shouted, and leaped between the man and the beast. The *krill* halted, lashed its tail, seated itself on its haunches.

"Do not be alarmed, Lukrien," it said in the smooth, carefully modulated voice of Xix. "I am here to help you."

"What are you?" Falconer said. "Where do you come from?"

"My appearance must surprise you, Commander," the cat-thing said. "But I am a construct, nothing more."

"An Ysarian construct. How?"

"Xix created me. I am his eyes and ears at a distance. You may address him through me." The krill rose, paced a step toward Grayle.

"Leave him alone," Falconer said.

The *krill* stared at Falconer. "My commander, the traitor must die."

"I need his help to force an entry into the plant."

"Nonsense."

"That's an order, Xix!" Falconer faced Grayle. "Drop the grenade belt. Pick up the coil." He indicated the latter lying where he had left it.

"This thing belongs to you, eh, Loki?" Grayle eyed the *krill*. "I wondered why you chose the particular method you did. But now that I've seen your weapon I understand."

"Commander — let me kill the traitor!" the *krill* hissed.

Falconer looked into the yellow eyes.

"Are you the only construct Xix made?"

"There were others, commander."

"Not in the shape of animals."

"True."

"A man named Pinquelle . . . and Riuies . . . and a soldier called Sleet. . . . "

"I have had many names, commander."

"Why? Why didn't you announce yourself?"

"It seemed wiser to be discreet. As for my purpose — why, it was to assist you in the nurture of the technology we needed to do that which we must do."

"The placement of the power plant is no coincidence, then."

"I was instrumental in selecting the site, yes."

"You're full of surprises, aren't you, Xix? I wonder what you'll come up with next."

"I am true to my purpose,

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Commander, nothing more."

Falconer turned abruptly to Grayle.

"We're going down the mountain, 'Thor. We're going to recharge the power coil and return here. Then Xix is going to lift for Ysar. Help me, and I'll take you with me. Refuse and Xix will deal with you."

Grayle growled and took a step toward him. The *krill* tensed its long legs, its head up, eyes bright on Grayle's throat. Falconer stared into Grayle's face.

"Why, 'Thor?" he said softly. "Why are you intent on destroying us all?'"

"I swore to kill you, Loki. I intend to fulfill that promise."

The *krill* yowled and yearned toward Grayle: Falconer restrained it with a word. "You can commit suicide," he said. "Whereas if you stay alive and cooperate, a better opportunity may present itself."

For a moment, Grayle hesitated. Then he stepped back, picked up the coil, slung it by its straps over his shoulder.

"Yes," he said. "Perhaps it will."

Colonel Ajax Pyler stood beside his staff car, looking toward the point from which the firing had come.

"Well, Cal? What the devil is going on over there!"

The aide was speaking urgently into a field phone. "Bring him up the road. I'll talk to him myself." He switched off. "A B Company man, Colonel. Something spooked him. He swears he saw two men cross the plant grounds and enter the building. He opened up on them. . . . "

"And?"

"It's a wild tale . . . here they come now."

A jeep was approaching from the direction of the perimeter fence. It pulled in beside the staff car; a sergeant and a private jumped down, stood at attention. The sergeant saluted.

"Sir, this is the private — "

"I can see that. Get on with it. Just what did you see?"

"Colonel, I seen these here two fellers, they come out o' the woods up above where I was at, first thing I knew he had my gun out of my hands — "

"Were you asleep?"

"Not me, Colonel! Too damn cold. These fellers come up quiet, and with the wind and all, and I was watching towards the plant, never figured nobody — "

"So they jumped you and took your gun. Then what?"

"Well — I guess I yelled, and one of 'em told me to be quiet. Real nice spoken, he was. Big feller. Both of 'em. And — "

"What happened, man? Which way did they go?"

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"Why, like I told sergeant here, they up and went right down through the wire."

"What did they cut it with?"

"Hell, Colonel, they didn't cut nothing. Tore that wire up with their bare hands. One of 'em did. Other feller was loaded down."

"Sergeant, why didn't the alarms go off? I ordered triple circuitry all the way around the perimeter!"

"Colonel, I don't know — "

"How could anyone get inside unobserved? The entrance is flood-lit — "

"That's just it, Colonel! They never used the front door — nor the holes them Special Forces boys blew. Just walked right through the wall! And after that come this critter. Big, black as a caved-in coal mine, and eyes like fire. It come right up to me and looked at me like Hell's door left open, and went on down and through the wire. That was when I let fly, Colonel."

"That's enough!" Pyler jerked his head at the sergeant. "Take this man back to the dispensary. I don't know what he's been drinking, or where he got it, but he's raving like a lunatic."

He turned to his aide. "Cal, get a squad of master marksmen together, post them covering the exit. If there's anyone in there, we'll be ready when he comes out!"

Lieutenant Harmon pushed through the clump of men examining the tangled barbed wire through which a swathe had been untidily cut.

" . . . look at these ends," a man was saying. "That wasn't sheared; it failed in tension. Look at the deformation. It's been stretched."

"Hey — here's why the screamers didn't go off." Another man showed a strand of insulated wire. "They jumped it."

"Who saw what happened?" Harmon barked the question. Faces turned his way. He got a brief second- and third-hand account of the progress of the two intruders through the wire, across the grounds, and into the rear of the building.

"They didn't mess with the doors," a bulky corporal grunted. "They made their own hole."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Put the light on it, Sherm," the corporal said. A dazzling searchlight sprang to brilliance, thrust a smoky finger across the hundred yards of rain-soaked turf to glare on the buff-colored masonry wall marred by a ragged black aperture at ground level.

"I didn't hear any explosion," Harmon said.

"Wasn't none." The corporal spat. "They busted that hole barehanded."

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"Don't kid me," Harmon snarled.

"Hey, ain't you that out-of-state cop?" a freckle-faced soldier with a pale, pinched face spoke up. "I heard the man you were after tore the door off a car, something like that. Maybe it's the same guy."

Harmon glowered at the laughter. "Where'd they take this kid that saw all this?"

"Field dispensary. Down the road."

Harmon walked back to the jeep Zwicky had lent him, turned it, drove back up past the parked vehicles of the convoy. It took him fifteen minutes to find the white mobile hospital, parked in a field under trees. Inside, he asked for and was led to Tatum's bedside.

"Hell, I ain't sick," the private said indignantly.

"Take it easy, fellow," Harmon said. "Now tell me what this man you saw looked like. . . . "

Lying in darkness with his face against the cool floor, Jess Dooley drew deep, regular breaths, forcing himself back to calm. Panic wasn't going to help. *Panic kills,* that was what the posters on the cool, green walls back at headquarters said. He wasn't really trapped in a maze with no way out, trapped in the dark, buried alive —

Nothing like that. He was lost, sure. A man could get lost easy enough in a mess of crawlways, even if he *had* studied the plans for a whole five minutes. But what was lost could be found.

All he had to do was keep his head, feel his way, and after a while he'd hear them coming to look for him. He'd been scraping his chin and bumping his head and eating dust and taking the long tour of the crawlway system for half an hour now. Been doing all right, too, up until the panic hit him. Claustrophobia, that's what they called it. Never bothered him before. But thirty minutes of being blind was enough for the first time out. Now he wanted air, wanted light, wanted to raise his head, stand up, instead of being rushed in here in this space just high enough to push through, with all those tons of rocks above —

Take it easy, Dooley. No panic, remember. Maybe one of the other guys had gotten in first, and forgotten to fire his screamer, and maybe it was all just spinned wheels.

And maybe he'd better stop lying here and get moving. Jess snorted dust from his nose, and moved forward. His outstretched hand touched a rounded plastic-walled duct. He remembered the duct system: it would lead a man out of this maze. And there were

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access panels spotted along it. . . .

Three minutes later, Dooley was inside the big duct, headed in a direction he hoped was upstream. He covered fifty feet, rounded a turn — and heard faint sounds from up ahead — or was it off to the side? Voices. Good old Drake, knew he'd come, him and Ike. Close now. Yell, and let them know? Hell with it. Came this far, play it cool. Could see a faint light up ahead, through a grill. Dope was wearing off. Just make it up there, and flap a hanky, and in another minute or two they'd be outside, having a good laugh together, breathing that cold, fresh air. . . . Smiling, Jess Dooley moved forward along the duct above the Energy Staging Room.

The exhaust grill was a louvered panel two feet by three, designed to be serviced from the inside. Jess found the release clips, lifted the grid aside. The voices were cleared now, not more than twenty, thirty feet away. . . .

Jess frowned, listening. That wasn't Drake's voice, or Ike's They weren't even speaking English. Frowning, Jess lay in the darkness and listened.

"Put it down here." Falconer ordered. Grayle lowered the drained power coil to the floor, while the *krill* watched closely.

Falconer knelt beside the pack, unstrapped it, exposing the compact device within.

"Get the cover off the service hatch," he ordered.

Followed by the cat-thing, Grayle crossed to the hatch, forced a finger under the edge of the steel plate, ripped it away as if it were wet cardboard.

"Stand aside." Falconer lifted the discharged coil. Grayle hadn't moved.

"Don't try it yet," Falconer said. "The odds are still too great."

"Loki, don't charge that coil," Grayle said. "Defy your master. Without your help it's powerless."

"My master — ?"

The *krill* moved swiftly forward, raised a hook-studded forearm.

"Stand fast, Xix," Falconer snapped. The creature paused, turned its great eyes on him. "He threatens our existence, Commander!"

"I'll decide that."

"But will you?" Grayle said. "Don't you really know yet, Loki?"

The *krill* yowled and struck at Grayle, ripping the leather arm of his jacket as he jumped back. It followed, ignoring Falconer's shout.

"See how your faithful slave comes to heel, Loki!" Grayle called.

Falconer took two swift steps

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to the open hatch, poised the coil on the rim, caught up the two heavy jack-tipped cables.

"Stop, Xix, or I'll cross-connect the coil and melt it down to slag!"

The *krill* whirled on Falconer, jaws gaping, the serrated bony ridges that served as teeth bared in a snarl.

"Would you aid the treacher in his crimes?"

"I'll listen to what he has to say," Falconer said.

"Commander! Remember, only I can take you back to Ysar!"

"Talk, 'Thor," Falconer said. "What are you hinting at?"

Twelve feet to the right and eight feet above the spot where Grayle stood with his back to the wall, Jess Dooley lay, his blind eyes staring into inky blackness, his ears straining to make sense of the jabber of alien voices rising through the open ventilation grill beside him.

There were three of them: one deep, rough-edged, one a resonant baritone, one an emotionless tenor. He didn't like that last one: it sounded the way a corpse would sound if it could sit up and talk. And the other two sounded mad clear through. Jess couldn't understand the words, but he knew the tone. Somebody was fixing to kill somebody down there. There wasn't any way he could stop it, even if the victim didn't have it coming. Because this was them, sure enough: the ones who'd messed things up here, sabotaged the place, killed all those people. Russians, probably. Too bad he didn't know Russian. Probably be getting an earful now.

He was lucky he'd heard them when he did. Another second, and he'd have dropped right down amongst 'em. And from what he had heard about Commie spies, that would be the end of the Dooley biography.

No, there was nothing to do. Just lie quiet, and wait for what came next — and be ready to move fast, if it worked out that way.

Lying on the hard cot in the tiny metal-walled room, Anne Rogers wondered where she was. She remembered wind, rain, bright lights shining across wet tarmac —

They had taken a helicopter. She and . . . and a man.

It was gone again. A crazy dream. About running, and police cars, shots, breaking glass —

The copter, hurtling low above whipping treetops, the sudden jarring impact, and —

She had been hurt. Maybe the copter ride was a dream, but she had been hurt. She was sure of that. Her hands went to her face, explored her skull, checked her

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arms, ribs. She sat up, and was surprised at the dizziness that swept over her. Her legs seemed to be intact; there were no heavy bandages swathing her anywhere. Her head ached, and there were lesser aches here and there, but nothing serious. Her eyes went once again around the small room. A hospital, of course. Some sort of temporary one, like the kind the police took to the scene of an accident.

The police.

She remembered all about the police now. He — the man — strange, she couldn't remember his face clearly, or his name — had attacked a policeman. Or two of them. And now where was he? Anne felt a sudden pang of fear. Was he dead? For some reason, the idea filled her with panic. She swung her legs over the side of the bed. She was still fully dressed, even to the muddy trenchcoat. Whoever had brought her here hadn't taken much trouble with her. But why should they? As far as they were concerned, she was just a gun-moll, an accomplice of an escaped convict.

Rain drummed and beat on the roof, only inches above her head. She rose and went, a little unsteadily, across to the narrow door. A passage less than three feet wide led past identical doors to a square of dim light at the end. She went to it, looked through a window into a room where a man stood, talking into a canvas-cased telephone.

"He's inside the power plant, Captain, but I can't get any cooperation out of the Army. I've been ordered to stay the hell and gone back from the fence, not go near the place. But this boy is my meat. Brasher, all six-three of him! I've got bones to pick with this con, and it'll be *his* bones!" There was a pause while he listened, his face set in a scowl.

"Don't worry. I know how to handle it. . . . Sure, I'll stay back. I've got the spot all picked. I can cover the front and the hole he blasted in the side, both. Whichever way he comes, I'll be there — just for insurance. I'll be watching him through the sights. One wrong move, and — Sure, I'll watch it. Don't sweat me, Captain. Just so I've got your backing. Right." He hung up, stood smiling a crooked smile at the wall.

"But I've got a funny feeling," he said softly, aloud, "that any move that son of a bitch makes will be the wrong one — for him!"

Anne moved quickly away from the door, hurried to the opposite end of the passage, stepped out into driving wind and slashing rain. It was dark here, but a hundred feet away were the lights of the vehicels on the road,

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and beyond was the looming pile of the power plant, bleak as a mortuary in the glare of the floodlights.

Grayle was in there. And when he came out, they'd be waiting for him. She had to warn him.

Ten minutes later, having crossed the road below the convoy and approached the power plant beyond the glare of the fieldlights, Anne studied the front of the building from the shelter of a clump of alder. The doors had been blown away, the entry was wide open. There was nobody near it. If she ran, without stopping to think, quickly, now —

She had covered half of the hundred yards of open lawn before a shout sounded.

"It's a woman!" another voice yelled.

"Shoot, damn you!" a third voice commanded.

There was the flat, echoing *carrong!* of a heavy rifle, and mud leaped in a gout beside her. She ran on, heard the second shot, felt the sting of mud that spattered her legs. Then she was among the rubble, leaping an overturned chair, scrambling between broken door frames as a third bullet chipped stone above her head and screamed away into the darkness.

"Grayle," Anne whispered, looking along the dark corridor. "Where are you?"

Five minutes later, she came on wet, muddy footprints in the passage. She followed them, moving quickly along the silent passage, to a stairwell leading down.

"Do you know what my mission here on Earth was, Loki?" Grayle asked.

"To conduct a routine reconnaissance."

"One of Xix's lies. My orders were to establish a class O beacon."

"Class O. That refers to a major navigational aid with a power output in the lower stellar range."

"Commonly known as a Hellcore."

"A Hellcore device — on an inhabited world?" Falconer shook his head. "You must be mistaken. Battle Command has no authority to order such a measure."

"The order didn't come from Battle Command. It came from Praze — my ship."

"Go on."

"I refused to comply, ordererd the mission aborted. Praze refused, overrode my commands."

"I wondered about the crash. An Ysarian ship doesn't malfunction. You scuttled her, didn't you?'"

"Ship-killer!" the *krill* hissed.

"I scuttled her — but not before she got the Hellcore away. It impacted in the sea, off the

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coast of the continent now known as North America."

"Why didn't you refer the order to Battle Command for confirmation?"

"Battle Command is a machine. It would have confirmed it."

"You're raving, 'Thor! Battle Command is made up of veteran combat officers: High General Wotan, Admiral Tyrr — "

"No, Loki — Not for a long time now. You might ask Xix how long."

"Commander — we will listen no longer to this treacher! Charge the coil! Our time runs out!"

"Ask him what his hurry is, Loki. Ask him what it is he's so eager to accomplish."

"To leave this world, what else?" the *krill* said.

"Ask him about the beacon."

"What does the beacon have to do with it?"

"He raves, my commander," the *krill* whined.

"Ask him about the storm," Grayle said. "Ask him what he had to do with that!"

Falconer looked across at the great black entity. "Answer," he said.

"Very well — but we waste precious seconds. My instruments told me that the beacon device had been placed on the surface, but only the basic protective field was energized, due to the sabotage of the traitor. My first act when I began to draw energy from the primitive broadcast field was to transmit the 'proceed' signal on the Y band for crust penetration, using a matter-annihilation beam. Naturally, a side-effect of weather disturbance was created. The device is now well within the planetary interior. Once we are clear of the planet, it will require only the final triggering pulse to the reactor to ignite the beacon. But we must act swiftly! If the triggering signal is not received within a period of hours, the device self-destructs!"

"Cancel that," Falconer said. "We're not going to activate the beacon. It won't be needed now. Not after all these years."

"Not perform our clear duty?"

"It's not our duty — not any more."

"I fail to understand what circumstances you conceive could relieve us of responsibility for completion of a Fleet mission."

"Time! A great deal of time has passed. If the beacon had been needed another ship would have been sent out."

"How does the passage of a few days influence the Ysarian Grand Strategy?"

"Over twelve hundred local years is more than a few days."

"What is this talk of centuries? Is it perhaps intended as a jest?"

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"Don't you know how long we have been here?"

"Since our arrival at this world, less than ten thousand hours have elapsed, a little over a year."

"Something interfered with your chronometry, Xix. You're wrong by a factor of a thousand."

"I am incapable of error within my design parameters. The need for the beacon is as great as ever. Accordingly, I will trigger it as planned. I can agree with no other course."

"*You* can agree? You're a machine. You follow orders."

"My ultimate responsibility is to Battle Command. Its directives override your authority, Commander. The beacon will be activated as planned. Let us hope that the White Fleet has not suffered reverses in battle for lack of it."

"I think I understand," Falconer said. "Xix, you've been on Q-status for most of the past twelve centuries. Your chronometric sensors only registered the periods of awareness."

"It is correct that I have from time to time reverted to Q status as a power conservation measure. But I fail to grasp your implication that this status has dimensional characteristics."

"It means," Grayle said, "that as far as it's concerned, when it's switched off, nothing is happening."

"The phenomenal world exists only during active status," Xix said calmly. "This is confirmed not only by basic rationality, but by the absence of sensory input during such periods."

"I see. You don't shut yourself off. You turn off the world."

"These are mere semantic niceties, my Commander."

"How do you account for the fact that when you reactivate, you find that changes have taken place around you?"

"I have observed that it is a characteristic of the Universe to reform in somewhat altered state after a discontinuity."

"What about the power broadcast you're drawing on? You think the savages I found here a millennium ago could have built that transmitter in six weeks?"

"A manifestation of the discontinuity effect previously noted. I had intended to discuss these phenomena with you at leisure, possibly during the voyage home."

"Do you realize," Falconer said, "that when you transmit that signal you'll turn the planet into a minor sun?"

"That is correct," the *krill* said.

"For the love of Ysar, Xix! Listen to me!"

"For the love of Ysar, my commander, I cannot. Now let us proceed with that which must be done."

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"Tell it to go to the Ninth Hell," Grayle said thickly.

"Come, my commander. You know that without the coil I — and you — can never leave this world. And time grows short."

"Don't do it, Loki." Grayle said. "Let the ship rot where it is."

The *krill* seemed to smile at Falconer, baring a serrated ridge of ivory white. "Without power, I cannot lift, true. But I will not come to an end by slow decay. Nor by the chemical bombs of the primitives. Reflect: the Y-field is still at operational level, is it not? I can trigger the beacon at any moment — from here."

"And incinerate yourself along with the rest of the planet."

"I have no alternative but to perform my duty. Your betrayal will change nothing — except that you will not live to see Ysar. I will regret your death. A useless death, Lokrien."

"If I agree," Falconer said, "will you contact a Fleet Outpost for confirmation before you trigger the Hellcore?"

"It will mean a dangerous delay. But — yes, as you wish. I agree."

"It's lying," Grayle said. "As it's lied all along."

"Enough!" the *krill* said, rising to all fours. "Proceed now, my commander! I can wait no longer!"

As Falconer hesitated, there was a sudden sharp sound from the door twenty feet distant in the end wall. It swung open, and a slim figure in a trench coat stepped through, hesitated. Her eyes found Grayle. In that instant, the krill couched, leaped. Even more swiftly, Grayle moved, sprang between the beast and the girl. The krill struck him full on, knocked him back against the girl. She fell under their feet as Grayle rose, his hands locked on the beast's throat, while its talons raked savagely across him from throat to groin.

"Xix!" Falconer roared, and the cat-thing crouched away, while Grayle staggered, blood flooding down across his shredded jacket.

"You asked me once . . . where I'd seen wounds like those before," he said between his clenched teeth. "I thought then you mocked me."

"I saw John Zabisky," Falconer said. "And the dead soldier on the trail."

"There was another time . . . long ago, Loki. In a house built of timbers on a rocky hill among the snows. A woman and a child. Gudred, my wife, and Loki, my son." He looked across at Falconer. "May the Nine Gods forgive me, I thought you'd made them."

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Falconer's face turned to a rigid mask. His eyes locked with those of the *krill*.

"*You* killed them," he said. "And let 'Thor believe I did it."

"It was necessary," the *krill* hissed. "He would have subverted you from your duty!"

"In the name of Ysar, you've betrayed everything that Ysar ever meant!"

"Ysar!" the *krill* yowled. "I weary of the name Ysar, and of your foolish sentimentality! Ysar is dead, dead these hundred centuries! But you live — as I live — eternally! Let that reality sustain you! Now do your duty, Commander!"

"He's telling the truth for once," Grayle said. "Ysar is dead, and only her undying machines — and a handful of immortal men — act out the dead dream."

"But — I remember Ysar. . . ."

"Your memories are false," the *krill* said. "You were born aboard ship, Lokrien, nurtured in an amniotic tank, educated by cybertape! You were given the vision of that which once was and is no more to inspire you in the performance of your duty. But surely now we can dispense with childish images! You live for your duty to Battle Command, as I do! Now let me kill the traitor, and we will be on our way, once again to voyage outward, at home in the great emptiness of Space!"

"Loki, it's bluffing! Without the coil, it dies — because that's what it draws its power from. That's why it came along — to keep an eye on the coil! Destroy it, and you destroy the ship — and its murderous robot with it!"

"Commander! Perhaps I erred through overzealousness. But if you destroy the coil, you die too!"

"Do it now, Loki!"

"Fools!" the *krill* raged. "I tried to spare you the last, full knowledge of yourselves, but you leave me no choice. True, I am a construct of Xix, linked to the neural circuitry of the ship, and with the death of the ship I die. But you, too, are constructs! Kill me, and you kill yourselves! Let me live, and yours is life eternal — even for the treacher, Gralgathor!"

Grayle gave a short, harsh laugh. "If we're constructs, we're able to do what a man would do."

"I move swiftly, Lokrien — perhaps more swiftly than you think."

Falconer looked at the catthing, crouched, tail lashing, its eyes locked on him. He looked at Grayle, waiting, ignoring the terrible wounds across his chest.

"If I destroy the coil, we all die," he said softly, in English. "If I don't — the Earth dies."

"Decide, Commander," the *krill* said. "I will wait no longer."

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Jess Dooley peered down into the gloom at the blurred figures below. He couldn't make out the details, just vague dark shapes against a deeper darkness.

Until just now he hadn't had a clue as to what was going on; only that it was killing business. But he'd heard what the last fellow said, in plain American, about the Earth dying. That was clear enough. Everybody said World War Three wouldn't leave enough pieces to pick up for anybody to bother. Looked like the Russians were having words about — whatever it was they came here to do. One of them, the mean-voiced one, was for doing it right off. The other one, with the deep voice, was against it. And the third one wasn't sure. But he'd be making up his mind in a minute.

Jess got silently to his hand and knees. He wasn't sure yet just what he was going to do — but he knew that he'd have to do something, even if it was wrong. He blinked, trying to penetrate the blindness, trying to get a good look at the fellow with the dead man's voice. He was the one to watch, the one to stop. If he'd just move a little more this way. . . .

"For Ysar," Falconer said, and reached to close the contacts. The *krill* yowled in triumph, took two swift paces, reared above Grayle —

From the shadows above a dark shape leaped, struck the cat-thing full across the back, unbalancing it enough that the stroke of its taloned paw went wide. It bucked, threw the man off, spun to leap at Falconer —

Fire burst from the hatch. In mid-spring, the cat-creature's body contorted; it struck the metal side of the machine, sprawled away from it, its limbs raking futilely in a last effort to reach Falconer, who sagged against the side of the unit, shaking his head dizzzily. Grayle clung to the wall, fighting to stay on his feet.

"It lied . . . again," he whispered.

The *krill* lay limply; the light still glowed, but weakly, fading from the great eyes. It spoke in a dying voice:

"The long twilight . . . ends at last . . . in night."

"I'm all right, man," Dooley said as Falconer lifted him to his feet. "Don't tell me what that was I jumped. I don't want to know. Just get me out of this place."

"It's dead." Falconer said. "And the generators are stopping."

"But we're still alive," Grayle said. "That means we're bio-constructs, not mechanical. And now

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we're mortal creatures. We'll age and die like any man."

Falconer went to Anne, lifted her in his arms. "Until then we can live like any man."

They made their way up the echoing concrete steps, along the empty corridors. The first light of day gleamed beyond the shattered entrance. Already the wind was dying, the rain abating.

As the two men stepped out through the scattered rubble, light glinted on the dark hillside. Grayle leaped and cried out as a single shot rang out from the wooded slope above the building.

Captain Zwicky, coming up silently behind the man who lay in prone firing position behind the big pine, saw the stir of movement in the shattered entrance below, saw the two men step into view, heard the flat crack of the gun, threw himself on Harmon as he relaid his sights for the second shot.

"Why did you shoot him?" Zwicky shouted at the policeman as the latter wiped a big hand across his bloodied mouth. "Why?"

"Because," Harmon said with total conviction, "the son of a bitch thought he was better than I was."

"I'm sorry, brother," Falconer said. "Sorry for everything, but most of all for this."

"Xix was right," Grayle whispered. "But only half right. Even the longest night . . . ends at dawn."

Carrying Anne, Falconer walked out across the dark lawn toward the waiting men.

—KEITH LAUMER

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GALAXY'S STARS

Richard Wilson, who has been a science-fiction fan since he was old enough to pick out his own reading and a science-fiction writer for almost as long, doesn't write nearly enough — his job as director of Syracuse University's News Bureau keeps him too busy —but when he writes it is good. Witness *A Man Spekith,* herein, or *Mother to the World,* which won him a Nebula award.

How did he get his start? It happened while he was still in P.S. 26, in Brooklyn. "I'd become bored with carving my desktop," says Wilson, "and saw a newspaper clipping on the floor. It had been torn raggedly down the center of a column. I had the left-hand part, which varied from a half to two-thirds of the whole. I read it; anything to avoid the math that was being taught at the front of the room. Naturally it made little sense.

"I can't recall now what the clipping was about, but I pieced out the unfinished phrases, writing out the interrupted line so that it hooked up with the beginning of the next. Sometimes it was obvious what the missing words were, but more often I had to invent whole new sentences.

"Do I hear somebody saying William Burroughs? Maybe; but I did it earlier — and I never tried to sell the result.

"After a while I tried making up the left-hand side as well as the right. From then on I was doomed to be a writer."

When Bruce McAllister made his first sale to *If* a few years ago, he was in a close race for prominence as science-fiction's youngest writer. (He was then fourteen and a half, and beaten out narrowly a few decades by young Kenneth Sterling, who made his first sale at 12.) Now he is all of a mature 22. He comes of a Navy family; began writing in school in La Spezia, Italy, where his father was stationed at the time; now is preparing to graduate from college.

Larry Eisenberg has a Ph.D. in electrical engineering and works for the Rockefeller Institute. Among other accomplishments, he designed one of the first practical transistorized cardiac pacemakers, a decade or so ago, has appeared widely in many magazines and is co-author of *Games People Shouldn't Play,* a book detested by many psychiatrists who construe it as an attack on their profession.

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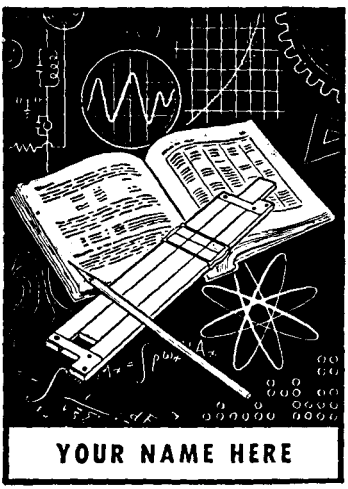

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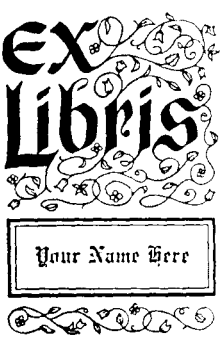

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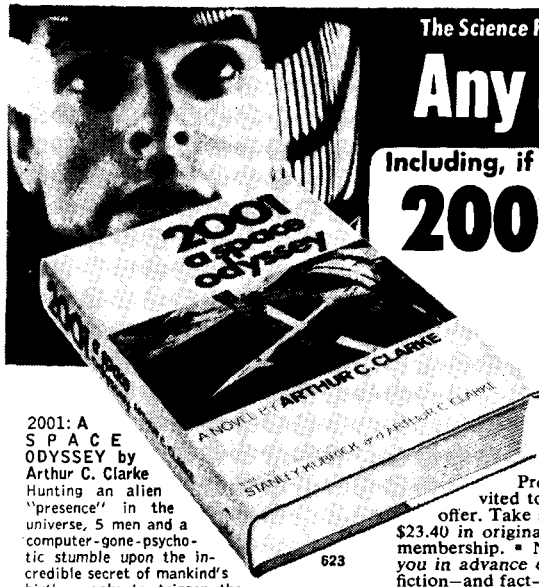

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